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Vol. L.

THE SKY DEMON; or, Rainbolt, the Ranger.

BY OLL COOMES,

AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," "THE DUMB SPY," "ANTELOPE ABE," "KEEN-KNIFE," "PROSPECT PETE," ETC., ETC.



ALL STARTED AND LIFTED THEIR EYES UPWARD, AND AS THEY DID SO, EVERY FACE BECAME BLANCHED WITH TERROR.

The Sky Demon;

OR,
RAINBOLT, THE RANGER.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "LITTLE FOXFIRE," "VAGABOND
JOE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE VILLAIN'S PLOT.

In fifteen minutes the emigrant train on the Union Pacific railroad was to leave the depot at Omaha, going west.

Two men, evidently waiting for the train, might have been seen pacing to and fro upon the station platform in close conversation.

The oldest of the two was apparently forty years of age. He was of medium height and build, with steel-gray eyes, sharp and brilliant. His hair, which was cut closely to a well-shaped head, was of a dark brown, as was also his heavy mustache and whiskers. He was dressed in light gray clothes, after the fashion of the day (1869).

The other individual was a man of some thirty years. He was much taller than his companion, but not so compactly built. His hair was black as the raven's wing, and hung about his shoulders long and straight; his eyes were black, but small and evil-like. His face was smoothly shaven, and bore the unmistakable evidence of a dissipated character. He was dressed in a suit of dark clothes that fitted him stiffly and made him appear "at ease."

No one in Omaha knew these two individuals, yet their names were spoken daily in connection with their crimes, for the former was Duval Dungarvon, the notorious robber-captain of the Black Hills, and the latter Blufe Brandon, the renegade Cheyenne chief known as Black Bear.

Having glanced about them to see that no one was near, the robber chief asked, in a low tone:

"Well, Brandon, have you made up your mind about that matter?"

"Not exactly," answered Brandon, "for, since I have considered that you have oceans of gold stowed away in the 'Hills,' I think you can afford to say ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand furies!" replied the robber-captain; "what would such a notorious cut-throat as you are do with *ten thousand dollars*? You couldn't spend it among your accursed Indians, and you *dare* not attempt to spend it among white people! But, however, I suppose I must submit, as the game is in your hands. But, mind you, the girl has got to be placed in my hands at the Devil's Tarn, forty miles south of Cheyenne, and if one hair of her head is injured, I will not give you one cent!" and the eyes of the robber-captain glowed like living coals of fire.

"How soon will Sanford—I believe that's what you called him—start for San Francisco?"

"Within the next ten days, I understand—however, I can telegraph you at Julesburg on the morning they start—using, of course, our hotel *noms de plume*. Now, remember."

At this juncture, the conductor's call of "All aboard" ended the two villains' conversation, and bidding his companion adieu, Blufe Brandon entered the cars, and in another moment he was rolling toward the mountains.

Duval Dungarvon entered an omnibus, and ordered the driver to drive him to the Wyoming Hotel.

And thus in a few minutes two villains—one a robber and the other a renegade, both from the fastnesses of the Black Hills—had planned and plotted a dark and perhaps bloody crime.

Five days later, and Duval Dungarvon was again pacing the depot platform. He was alone, but, from the impatient look upon his face and the occasional glance up the street, it was evident that he was expecting some one.

Presently his face brightened as he saw a carriage, drawn by four horses, rolling down toward the depot, and as it drove up alongside the platform he walked to the opposite side, and mingled with some men collected there, but all the while kept a close watch upon the carriage.

When the vehicle stopped, a tall, noble, gray-haired man of some fifty years stepped out and assisted a young and beautiful girl to the platform. These were followed by four young men dressed in sportsmen's garbs, each carrying a new Spencer rifle and a game-bag.

The elderly gentleman was Colonel Wayland

Sanford, and the young girl his daughter Silvia. They were just about to start on a visit to friends in San Francisco. Two of the young men, Willis and Frank Armond, were the colonel's nephews and men of means and leisure. The other two, Walter Lyman, attorney, and Ralph Rodman, physician and surgeon, were Willis' and Frank's intimate friends, who, like themselves, did not have to depend entirely upon their profession for a livelihood; so the four young gentlemen had concluded to accompany the colonel and daughter as far as the mountains, where they could spend the summer in hunting as recreation from the dust and heat of city life.

As soon as Duval Dungarvon saw the party enter the cars that stood awaiting their load of human freight, he turned and entered the telegraph office, and taking up a blank sheet himself at a desk and wrote the following message, which he at once dispatched:

"OMAHA, June 15th, 1869.
"WILLIAM BATES, Esq., Julesburg, W. T.:—Sanford and daughter leave on morning train for San Francisco."
CLIFTON PAYSON."

Paying for the dispatch, the robber-captain went out upon the platform. The cars were just rolling away, and from one of the windows he beheld the eyes of Colonel Sanford fixed upon him like one in a trance; but in an instant the train was gone, and, turning on his heel, he strode away, muttering to himself:

"By furies! he recognized me! It's a good thing he's gone, Duval Dungarvon, alias Clifton Payson, for he might have given you trouble, and the best thing for you is to get out of here yourself."

And so he did. The next day the villain took the train West.

Had one from the grave confronted Colonel Sanford, he could not have been more startled than he was on seeing Duval Dungarvon. For fully an hour he sat in profound silence, which his young friends attributed to his feelings on leaving home, and the possible idea that he might never live to return to it again. Finally, however, he rallied and talked and joked in his usual humorous spirits.

After nearly two days' ride, the train rolled into Julesburg, where it stopped for a few minutes. But one person took the train at this point, and that person was Blufe Brandon, the renegade chief, his face completely disguised in a mass of false grizzly whiskers.

The renegade passed from coach to coach, and finally seated himself on the seat behind Colonel Sanford, which happened to be vacant. Julesburg was left far behind, and away in the distance westward the dark range of the Black Hills loomed up against the glowing sky.

There being no way-stations, the train rolled rapidly on, never tiring, never halting, gliding into the dark cut, by roaring canyon, over the yawning gorge, beneath the beetling crag, through dismal tunnel—on, on until it had entered the environs of the Black Hills. Then the evil-eyed passenger from Julesburg glanced around, and, seeing no eye upon him, placed his hand in his pocket and drew therefrom a small packet which he at once tossed out at the window with considerable force. A dull report like that of a pistol; a lurid flash like that by a rocket, where the packet struck the earth, followed this act. But one person in the cars saw that flash, and that was he who produced it; but, far away up on a mountain peak, another pair of eyes saw and read the meaning of that flash, and immediately from the same height a blazing arrow shot far up into the air, described a beautiful curve, and then fell to the earth again. Then, fully three miles further on toward the west, from the summit of another peak, a blue light might have been seen swinging to and fro, then standing still, then rolling through the air like a blazing hoop.

Suddenly, in rounding an abrupt curve, the glowing headlight flashed on a red flag standing in the center of the track. Instantly the wary engineer whistled down brakes, and in a moment the train stopped. At that instant a yell that fairly shook the old hills fell upon the ears of the passengers—a savage blood-curdling yell, mingled with the clash of fire-arms.

It required but a single thought for the passengers to realize the terrible truth. *The train had been stopped by a band of Indians!*

Simultaneous with the yell of the Indians a loud, coarse voice cried out:

"Put out the lights; the train has been attacked by the Indians!"

It was the voice of Blufe Brandon.

In an instant the lights were put out in that coach. Then followed a confusion that beggars description. The yells of the Indians, the re-

port of pistols, the crashing of glass, the jamming of shutters, the screaming of women, the commands and shouts of men, made the moment awful, terrible.

In the midst of the excitement Brandon sprang to his feet, and, leaning forward, seized Silvia Sanford around the waist—lifted her in his arms as though she had been an infant, and turning, glided out the door and sprang from the car.

"Oh, father, help! Some one is carrying me off!" cried Silvia, as she was borne from the car.

"Great God! what foul treachery is this?" cried Colonel Sanford, springing to his feet. "Willis, Frank, boys, all come, for Heaven's sake!" and, followed by the four young men, he rushed out and sprang from the car just in time to see the villain disappear down a black defile with his child.

The moment the renegade sprang from the car every Indian turned and followed him, leaving the train to resume its course, which it did, leaving Colonel Sanford and his young friends standing alone in that awful gloom!

It was quite evident that the attack had been carefully arranged, simply for the abduction of Miss Sanford, for no one was killed, nor did the savages attempt to board the train as they had done on previous occasions; but withdrew at a signal of their chief, Blufe Brandon.

A speechless silence fell over the colonel and his party. They stood and gazed into the gloom that seemed impenetrable.

The prospect of recovering the lost girl appeared to the experienced eyes of the father almost as gloomy as were the surroundings.

The remembrance of the face he had seen at Omaha as the cars were leaving, the face of a man whom he knew to be his bitter, implacable enemy, instantly caused him to connect the man with the disappearance of his daughter.

Under these circumstances it was indeed fortunate that the father was an experienced Indian-fighter. During the gold fever of 1848 he had crossed the plains twice, and spent many years in the mines of California. Then during the Pike's Peak excitement he spent a couple of years there, and during the Indian troubles he had command of a regiment of cavalry upon active duty, their field of operations being in the immediate vicinity of the Black Hills. Thus most of his life had been spent upon the frontier, or among the Indians, whose language, haunts and habits he had learned to perfection; and there was but little of the country in which they now were but what he was intimately acquainted with, though five years had elapsed since he had last traversed it. Knowing that no time was to be lost he shaped their course, and at once set off in the direction taken by the savages, the darkness rendering it impossible to follow the trail.

Thus began the young men's summer recreation on the plains!

CHAPTER II.

THE AERIAL DEMON OF THE MOUNTAIN.

NIGHT had fallen, but through the darkness gleamed the cheerful light of a camp-fire that burned in a little wooded valley, near where it debouched from the Black Hills into the great plain, or Buffalo Range. Within its radius of light, two men were visible—one lying upon the ground asleep, the other seated before the fire, evidently keeping guard. The former was a short, heavy-set man, of some five and thirty years, with a broad, florid face, that told of humor and good nature. A rifle was lying near, a hunting-knife was in his belt, and, though sound asleep, his hand grasped a short, stout club or *shillalah* which alone would have proclaimed his Hibernian extraction.

The Irishman's companion was a type of a different nationality. He was a tall, powerful negro, with skin black as the ebon darkness around him. He possessed limbs and muscles of Herculean development, and a face firm, courageous and intellectual in its outlines. He held a double rifle, which flashed like a bar of silver in the firelight. Both were dressed in garbs of buckskin, half-savage and half civilized in fashion.

The negro sat with his rifle resting in the hollow of his arm, gazing into the glowing fire with a kind of vacant look.

As the minutes stole by, his eyes grew heavy with watching, and, presently, his head rolled languidly upon his shoulders in a gentle doze. Soon, however, he was aroused by a sound—the sound of approaching footsteps. He sprang to his feet, and, shading his eyes with his hand, peered into the gloom. At this moment five human figures emerged from the forest and

halted within the radius of light. It was Colonel Wayland Sanford and his four young companions.

Colonel Sanford fixed his eyes upon those of the negro, and for a moment the two stood glaring at each other with a look of recognition, surprise, fear and revenge depicted upon their features. A profound silence ensued. The hand of the darky wandered mechanically to his knife, while the cold, gray eyes of Sanford flashed like burning coals, and his breast heaved and throbbed as though an internal volcano was surging within it.

The colonel was the first to break the silence.

"Ebony Jim! Villain and rascal!" he exclaimed, fiercely. "It is you?—you who deserve shooting without ceremony?"

The colonel's words seemed to transform the negro. His defiant, courageous look gave way to one of fear.

"Oh, good Lor!" he exclaimed, fairly trembling, "it's ole Massa Sanfor', de poor young missus's father, and now dis poor nigger's time am come!"

"Ah! you fear the halter of justice, do you, you black wretch?" exclaimed the colonel indignantly. "For four years I have hunted you—to shoot you!"

"Oh, good Heaben, massa, I hab done nuffin!"

"Then what brought you here, and why do you fear me?"

"Cause, massa, I s'pose you and dem gemmen dar come to 'rest dis nigger—"

"For what?"

"Why, you 'members I war hid in de woods when poor Massa Walraven war taken to de Debbil's Tarn and—"

"Hush! hush! for God's sake, Ebony, speak not of that affair!" cried the colonel, growing suddenly changed in his tone toward the darky. He spoke so loud that the Irishman was awakened from his slumber.

"Och, and be the Howly Vargin, and who's this that comes a disturbing of me peaceful slumber at the dead hour av night. Wirra, but I'll shpring afoot and bate their heads wid me ole shellalah, so shure, as me name is Flick O'Flynn," exclaimed the Hibernian, rising to a sitting posture and rubbing his eyes confusedly.

"I am sorry we have disturbed you," said Frank Armond, apologetically, "but I hope you will pardon us for the unceremonious intrusion."

"Ay, and that I will," replied O'Flynn, gaining his equilibrium of mind, "fer it's mees thet's glad to say the likes av yees in this h'athing conthry, so it is, so it is."

In the mean time, Colonel Sanford had stepped to Ebony's side and spoke in a lower and kinder voice:

"Forgive me, Ebony, for my rashness; but tell me truthfully, where is Florence Walraven?"

"Why should dis nigger know better dan enny body else, massa?"

"Because I know you assisted her to flee from home four years since, and now where is she?"

"Good Lor' only knows. S'pects she's in heaben wid de angels," replied the negro, apparently much surprised.

"Come, Ebony!" exclaimed Sanford, growing nervous and excited again. "Trifle not with me. You have lied to me already; you know where Florence is; you assisted her to flee. Speak, tell me the truth or your life shall pay—"

"Good Lor', you misjudge dis nigger, Massa Sanfor'. Nebber sence poor Massa Walraven went into de army have I see'd de young missus, and when Massa Walraven was convicted ob bein' a traitor and taken to de Debbil's Tarn—I mean when he war punished so orfully—dis nigger run away into de mountain fear he be sarved so too, 'case he see'd something, and nebber hab I see'd de young missus, nor nobody, till dis blessed minit."

"Are you speaking the truth, Ebony?" asked the colonel, seriously, calmly.

"As I's a born nigger dat's de truf, Massa Sanfor'."

"Then forgive me, old boy, for my hasty accusal," said the colonel, extending his hand to the darky. "Florence has been missing for four years, and we always suspicioned you of stealing her away."

"Dis nigger cherishes nuffin' ill in his heart to'rds ole Massa Sanfor'," said Ebony, grasping the colonel's hand, "but oh! how his heart aches when he t'inks ob dat awful—awful fair at de Debbil's Tarn."

"Hush, Ebony, about the Devil's Tarn," said Sanford, in a whisper. "It racks my soul with torture. Promise me you'll not mention it again."

"I promise," said the negro.

"Then let us be seated and talk of other things."

They all gathered around the fire and Colonel Sanford informed the two hunters of their mission there.

"Be garry, and it's Flick O'Flynn of Carricksfergus that can bate in more rhd niggars' skulls than any man on the job, and yees kin count mees in on the pursuit av the ghal, also. Wirra! but mees am in me glory when swinging me ole shellalah among the dirty black-g'ards, so it is, so it is—Har—rk!"

Though the Hibernian was talking quite boisterously, his practiced ear caught a far off and peculiar sound, coming from the Black Hills.

"Ay, and didn't ye hear thet, now?" he asked.

"No; what was it?" queried Sanford.

"It was a sound rhesembling the thuang av a horn—there she am again!"

This time all heard it, and, true enough, it was the far-off blast of a horn. Flick O'Flynn and Ebony exchanged inquiring and ominous glances.

"A hunter, I suppose," said young Rodman.

"Not a bit av it! It's the gathering call av robbers, in yonder hills," said O'Flynn, pointing away westward over the Black Hills.

"But what means that?" asked Willis Armond, pointing up toward the dark sky.

All eyes gazed upon the object in question with wonder and surprise. It was a bright, glowing speck not unlike a blazing star; but it was moving, drifting slowly through the heavens—now east—now west—now sinking—now rising—now circling around and around—again standing still against the black canopy of heaven.

"That is surely not a star," said Walter Lyman.

"No; but it's a mystery to me," said Colonel Sanford.

Again the twang of the horn was heard, and, as its echoes rolled back through the hills, the mysterious blazing star was seen to glide away through the heavens and disappear in a moment behind the mountain range.

"That is a mystery (that is not the agency of man)," said the colonel.

"Oh, Lor'! I tell ye, Massa Sanfor', our time am come! Dat war de horn ob de ark—angel wakin' up de dead."

"You're a fool, Ebony; you've lost all the courage you ever did possess."

"I know I's a fool, massa, but I's been a wicked nigger, and de world am comin' to a eend, and oh, Lor' ob heabens! dar comes de Ole Nick—de Ole Nick!—de Ole Nick! after dis chile—oh—oh—oh!"

Ebony stretched out his hands as if to keep off some horrible object. His eyes were lifted upward and glared like those of a madman. His lips stood slightly apart, revealing his firm-set teeth, and his features were convulsed with horror.

"Ebony! Ebony! are you going mad?" exclaimed Sanford, excitedly.

The negro moved not a muscle nor his uplifted eyes, but, at that instant, a fierce and terrible scream burst over the heads of the little group. All started and lifted their eyes upward, and as they did so, every face became blanched with terror. They saw what Ebony saw, and startled as he did. They saw not a human nor a beast, but an awful terrible figure—a figure resembling a human skeleton floating through the air, high over the tree tops, its ghastly proportions revealed by the smoke and flame emitted from the sunken eyes, the distended nostrils and the wide, grinning mouth. Great white arms bent and buffeted the air like the wings of a struggling vampire, while scream after scream pealed wild and unearthly from the horrid creature's lips. It was fully a hundred feet above the tree-tops and moved swiftly—so swift, that in a moment it had floated over the camp and disappeared behind the dark hills.

The party stood transfixed with horror. Colonel Sanford was the first to break the silence.

"In the name of God, what was it?" he gasped.

"I tell you it's de Ole Nick after dis poor, black nigger," persisted Ebony.

Flick O'Flynn acted quite indifferent. He showed but little surprise at sight of the horrid creature, yet he exclaimed:

"Holy Mother! it makes the hair stand on mees head, and polar icebergs rhol down me

back, but then it's not the fust time that Flick O'Flynn, of Carricksfergus, has see'd that chreature."

"What is it? beast, human, fiend or—"

"Ay, there now, and it's the horrid chreature known as the Aerial Demon of the Mountain."

CHAPTER III.

A MOMENT OF PERIL.

FOR some time the wildest excitement prevailed in the hunters' camp over what O'Flynn had said was the Aerial Demon, the scourge of the Black Hills.

Flick could throw no light on the subject, further than that he had seen it once before, and heard of its being seen by others, and striking terror to the hearts of the Indians.

For fully an hour this aerial apparition was the subject of conversation, and many and curious were the suppositions entertained by the party as to its nature.

By this time the clouds had rolled away, and the blue dome of heaven was glimmering with myriads of stars. The murky shadows were lifted from the great plain that stretched away in tranquil beauty like an ocean, broken now and then by a silvery lake or stream, or a little woodland isle that nestled down on its bosom like a mere black speck. And as the moments stole by, a score of dusky forms suddenly emerged from the shadow of one of those prairie islands, and moved silently over the plain.

It was a band of hostile Cheyenne Indians, heading toward the Black Hills.

As the night was far advanced, and Colonel Sanford and his young friends were greatly fatigued with their long tramp through the mountain, they concluded to remain with the hunters until morning, inasmuch as they had promised to accompany them on the morrow in pursuing the red-skins. The fire was replenished with fuel. The flames leaped up and relieved the gloom for many feet around; but backed in by the great woods on one side, and the rise of a hill on the other, the light was, as it were, pent up in the immediate vicinity.

And so it was hidden from the gaze of those on the near plain, but not to those on the hills, nor to those far out on the plain.

Flick O'Flynn was to stand guard the rest of the night—he refusing all offers of relief. He lit his pipe and seated himself before the fire, with his shillalah lying across his knees. The rest of the party stretched themselves in various attitudes about the fire to rest.

Just then a night-bird fluttered overhead with a startled scream. Every man sprung quickly to his feet. Was it the Aerial Demon again? They glanced around them. No. It was not the demon, but a sight equally as horrifying met their gaze. Out from the deep gloom, into the glare of the roaring camp-fire—with the silence of phantoms, their painted visages aglow with diabolical triumph, their hands clutching a knife or tomahawk, came a score of Cheyenne Indians, surrounding our friends on every side like sheep in a slaughter-pen. For a moment they paused just within the circle of light; then they uttered a yell, so fierce that the blood stood like ice in the veins of the whites.

"Och! and be the Howly Mother, it's a sorry time we'll have," exclaimed Flick O'Flynn, whirling his shillalah about his head; "but here goes," and he dashed among the savages with a yell.

"And here comes dis chile," exclaimed Ebony, clubbing his rifle and following.

"We have got to fight for our lives," said Colonel Sanford, who, possessing no weapon, stooped and picked up a heavy club, one end of which was afire, and swinging it aloft he dashed in among the savages. Frank and Willis Armond, Walter Lyman and Ralph Rodman following suit with clubbed rifles.

The conflict instantly became fearful.

The Cheyennes were three to one, and our friends fought with the desperation of despair—of madmen. Several savages went down, but the death of each one made the survivors all the more desperate; and presently Walter Lyman fell unconscious from a blow on the head, and Willis Armond received a severe wound on the arm. Defeat and death stared our friends in the face—they were being gradually overpowered—the savages were closing in upon them—another moment—But hark! what sound was that? Was it the voice of doom!

CHAPTER IV.

THE MASTER OF THE EAGLE.

IT was the wild scream of a bird that fell upon the ears of the combatants, but at the next

instant a horseman dashed wildly in among the savages, a drawn saber in hand. And so swift did the stranger swing the polished weapon right and left upon the tufted skulls of the redskins that it seemed a broad sheet of flame. Nor did the strange man come alone to the rescue. A large, tame gray eagle accompanied him, and the fierce bird seemed inspired with the same warlike spirit of its master. Down into the savages' faces, striking with talon, beak and wing, swooped the great bird with a scream, tearing and lacerating the flesh and eyes at every stroke.

The scale of battle was turned as if by magic. The savages, defeated and terrified, fled into the shelter of the forest, pursued by Ebony and the stranger's fierce bird, leaving half their number behind, dead.

All eyes were now turned upon their strange deliverer.

He was a young man not more than thirty. In stature he was about five feet, six inches. His figure was firmly knit, but flexible, and every movement supple, easy and graceful. His hair was of a dark brown, as was also his beard that in a great measure concealed his face and hung to the pommel of his saddle. A few premature wrinkles were faintly traced about his eyes.

A tunic of blue velvet ornamented with yellow fringe and confined at the waist by a leather belt, buckskin trousers, buckskin leggings and moccasins, and a gray felt hat constituted his garb.

A saber, a brace of revolvers, in his belt, and a rifle that was swung at his back by means of a strap passing over his shoulder, were the weapons he carried.

The animal he rode was a black, mettlesome mustang with arched neck and flashing eyes, clear limbs and muscular proportions.

A large, and what appeared cumbersome, pair of well filled saddle-bags were thrown over the cantle of the saddle, while on one side hung a double field-glass, and on the other side a coiled silver horn.

Replacing his saber in its scabbard, he turned and gazed upon those he had rescued. From one to the other his eyes wandered until they met those of Wayland Sanford, when a strange, wild light flashed in them. A momentary silence ensued. The horseman was the first to speak.

"A warm time you were having, my friends," he said, in a clear voice.

"Indeed we were," replied the old colonel, with a nervous tremor in his voice, induced by exertion and excitement; "and whom have we the honor of thanking for our rescue?"

"My name is Rodger Rainbolt," replied the horseman, in his clear, ringing voice, in which there was much of wild bluntness; "and now your name, if you please?"

"Wayland Sanford."

The ranger was silent for a moment, then he asked:

"What brings Wayland Sanford here in these wilds, dressed in the fine clothes of a citizen?"

The colonel informed him of the abduction of his daughter, and that they were in pursuit of the Indians.

"Uh hump!" ejaculated the ranger, when he had heard the colonel's story.

At this moment Ebony returned from pursuit of the flying savages, and, as the ranger's eyes fell upon him, he turned his animal so that the fire would not shine in his face.

In the mean time, Flick O'Flynn and Frank Armond were busily engaged in restoring young Lyman to his senses, of which a blow on the head had bereft him; while the young surgeon, Ralph Rodman, turned his attention to Willis's bleeding arm.

"Do you know what tribe the Indians belong to that captured your girl?" asked Rainbolt, after a moment's silence.

"They were Cheyennes," replied the colonel.

"Black Bear's cut-throats, I suppose," returned the handsome ranger.

"Golly mighty!" suddenly exclaimed Ebony, peering up into the ranger's face as he spoke; "dat sounds jist like Massa Walraven's voice, as I's a born nigger, but den it's not his face, for Massa Walraven died long ago—died at de Debbil's Tarn," and he turned away.

The ranger flashed a quick glance upon Sanford, who was moving uneasily; then in a tone of indifference said:

"I am afraid you will not succeed in rescuing your daughter if Black Bear has reached or does reach his haunts."

"God forbid that he should!" exclaimed Sanford.

"But," continued the horseman, "since I

am not particularly engaged at present, I can and will devote my time to assisting you in rescuing your girl. I wish, however, to act strictly alone, for the assistance I have will enable me to do so with success—but, I had entirely forgot my companion," and taking the silver horn from his saddle, he placed it to his lips and blew a shrill blast.

Immediately after this act the winnowing of great wings was heard, and a moment later the eagle that attacked the savages so fiercely settled down from the gloom overhead and perched itself upon the shoulder of the ranger. Blood was on its talons and beak.

"A noble pet you have, Mr. Rainbolt," said the colonel, admiringly.

"Yes, sir; one that will be worth more to me in rescuing your daughter than a dozen men. His instinct is wonderful and his strength prodigious. One stroke of his wing, Mr. Sanford, would break your arm as though it were a straw. I have known him to carry in his talons a weight of a hundred pounds. Ah, a noble bird is Echo, my eagle. He hates a red-skin with all the bitterness of his master."

"You must have had great patience in training him, Mr. Rainbolt."

"I do not claim all that honor. He was partly trained when he came into my possession. He was given me by an old Californian named Barker."

"Barker!" burst involuntarily from Sanford's lips; "Gustave Barker?"

"Yes; Gustave Barker," replied the ranger, eyeing the colonel sharply. "Do you know him?"

"Oh—no I have heard of him," replied Sanford, recovering from his sudden excitement.

There was a few moments' silence, broken only by the impatient pawing of the ranger's steed.

Doctor Rodman had succeeded in restoring Lyman to his senses, and had carefully dressed Willis's arm, which, after all, had only sustained a flesh-wound.

"I say, Lyman," said the young physician, after his friend had recovered his senses, "that blow you got on the head is what is termed in legal phrase, 'Salt and battery,' ain't it?"

"Yes," replied the young lawyer, rubbing his sore head; "but, in this affair there is more 'battery' than 'salt'; however, I shall bring action at once for damages."

"And try the case before—what is it?—oh, yes; the Aerial Demon," said Willis, laughing.

"The Aerial Demon!" exclaimed Rainbolt; "have you seen that horrid, mysterious creature?"

"Yes; it passed over our camp an hour or so ago. Can you throw any light on the real nature of the mystery?"

Nothing more than that it is the most frightful object I ever saw," returned the ranger.

"Ay, now, and it's yees that spakes the thruh' loudly, for it's mees that's seed the creature twice, and both times it stharterd polar icebergs down my back, so it did," said Flick.

"Well," said Rainbolt, "since I can be of no further service to you, gentlemen, I may as well take my departure. Should I succeed in rescuing your daughter, Mr. Sanford, I will communicate the fact to you at once," and as he concluded he took from his pocket a time-worn memorandum, and tearing out one of the stained leaves, handed it to Colonel Sanford, saying: "Read that, Colonel Wayland Sanford, and good-night to you all," and as he spoke the pet eagle arose into the air—the spirited mustang pricked up its ears, champed its bit impatiently, and the next moment Rodger Rainbolt, the ranger, was gone.

"He's a curious fellow—a living mystery," said Ralph Rodman; "but what ails you, colonel—what ails you?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing but excitement, as usual," replied the colonel, evasively; "but let me see what the ranger wants me to read."

He turned and stirred up the waning camp-fire, and seating himself upon the ground, glanced at the paper. A groan escaped his lips as he did so and the paper dropped from his hand, and falling into the fire, was consumed in an instant, while the colonel's hands dropped to his knees and his eyes became fixed upon the fire.

"What did he write, uncle?" asked Frank.

There was no response to his question.

Frank repeated it. Still no reply.

"The ranger has thrown the colonel's mind into a quandary," said young Lyman.

"Like the red naygur did yours," said Flick O'Flynn.

"How is it, colonel?" asked Rodman.

The colonel was still silent. Frank Armond advanced and laid his hand upon his uncle's shoulder, but he started back with a thrill of horror. The limbs of the colonel were rigid as death, his eyes were still fixed upon the fire with a cold, glassy, vacant stare. His lips stood slightly apart, and his features were ghastly as the dead's.

"Uncle, uncle!" exclaimed Frank, shaking him violently, "what ails you? Come, rouse up—great God, what can it mean, Rodman?"

The young doctor was bending over the colonel, his fingers resting upon the old man's pulse.

"Come, speak, Ralph, what does it mean?" repeated Frank.

"Heavens!" exclaimed the young doctor, starting up, "what could the ranger have written? It has killed the colonel, as God's in heaven, boys; he is dead—stone dead!"

CHAPTER V.

A ROBBER ROBBED.

THE blood-red sun hung low in the western heavens, its usual brightness partly obscured by the blue mist that hung over the mountain and plain. The Black Hills lay dimly outlined against the murky sky. In the vast expanse of mountain and plain but a single living object could be seen. That object was a large bird poised aloft above a narrow cleft, or valley, in the Black Hills. For some time it seemed to hang motionless on the air, then it descended down, down, until it was lost in the mountain shadows; then it darted up again, with a wild scream, from the valley, its keen eyes fixed on some object far below. And what think you it was? The Echo, the eagle, saw there!

It was a beautiful glade in the green-wood valley. A camp fire burning in the center of the glade. A number of Indians seated around the fire. Several lodges standing in the background. An Indian encampment.

But two of the Indians claim our especial notice. The young chief, Allacotah, and his beautiful wife, Silver Voice.

The young chief sat apart from his companions, apparently in deep thought. Presently the light figure of an Indian woman glided from one of the lodges in the background and approached him. She was young, not more than three and twenty. Her movements were graceful as the fawn's; her voice as sweet and clear as the chimes of a silver bell. She was dressed in a short frock of some green material, beautifully ornamented with Indian handwork, while beaded moccasins and white-fringed buckskin leggings incased her feet and ankles.

Approaching and laying her hand upon Allacotah's shoulder, she said, in pure English:

"Allacotah, my husband, seems thoughtful."

The young chief raised his eyes and gazed in to those of his wife.

"That is true," he replied; "but the voice of my beautiful wife cheers me, though I was only thinking—thinking of our great chief, Black Bear."

"Oh yes," replied the beautiful Indian woman; "it had not occurred to my mind before that to-day Black Bear was to return from the great wigwams of the pale-faces."

"Yes; and may his heart not be filled with evil when he comes! Black Bear is a bad man. He causes much trouble between the pale-faces and my people. He has made many widows and orphans among the great Cheyenne nation—waged war till Cheyenne blood flowed like water."

Two miles from the Indian encampment, on a high, bold bluff, stood Rodger Rainbolt, the ranger. One hand was resting on his animal's arched neck, while with the other he held his spy-glass to his eyes as he watched a tiny dark speck in the misty sky before him. That speck was Echo, his eagle.

"Yes, there are Indians there," he muttered to himself, "and perhaps they are the ones that I am in pursuit of. Echo, noble, sagacious bird, has traced them out, and now he marks the spot by rising himself in the air, now by descending, now rising again—now circling around and around. Ah, noble bird! he circles away, away. He knows his mission is done for the present, and now—"

He lowered his glass, and taking the coiled horn from his saddle, placed it to his lips and blew a shrill, prolonged blast, which, as it echoed far back over the hills, reached the ear of the eagle, and immediately it headed its flight toward its master. In a few minutes it was perched upon his shoulder.

"Your work is well done, Echo," said the ranger, caressing the bird, "and I have only to await darkness to accomplish mine."

The Cheyenne encampment was only a temporary one, the permanent village of Black Bear being located several miles southwest, within the southern extremities of the Black Hills.

In anticipation of the return of Black Bear, or Blufe Brandon, preparations were made for his reception; for a mounted messenger had arrived in camp during the day and informed Allacotah and his braves that Black Bear, with a beautiful captive, and accompanied by several of his warriors, would arrive there some time during the evening.

As the time for the coming of the distinguished white chief drew near, and darkness gathered around, preparations were hastily made for his reception.

Presently a wild yell announced the expected arrival.

The name Black Bear had a significant meaning as applied to the Renegade, Blufe Brandon. Had one who had never seen him in his disguise beheld him when he entered the lodge of Allacotah, they would have started up with sudden fear, for there was nothing natural in his appearance.

The villain was completely disguised in the skin of a black bear. Even the head of the animal rested upon that of his own, with its round, glaring eyes, its open mouth, red tongue and white fangs, in life-like presentation. As the nose of the animal projected over the head of the renegade the face of the latter was completely concealed by long, straggling hairs hanging from the under jaw of the animal's head, yet the ruffian's eyes shone through the hairy mask like those of a serpent through the dark. His arms and legs were wrapped in the skin carefully taken from the animal's limbs, with the long claws attached, and dexterously fixed to his toes and fingers—thus perfecting his disguise so completely that he looked like a bear walking erect upon his hind feet.

In his arms the renegade carried Silvia Sanford, who, a few minutes before their arrival, had fainted from sheer exhaustion, long fasting and excessive heat.

A rug of skins and robes was laid near the fire and the pale and beautiful captive placed upon it. Black Bear then turned to Silver Voice and requested her to look after the maiden's wants and assist the medicine-man in restoring her to consciousness.

Silver Voice advanced, and bending over the captive, gazed into her pretty, pale face. A low cry escaped her lips, and beckoning her husband she pointed down, and said: "Does it not look—"

"Never mind what the girl looks like, but hasten to restore her. That girl's life is worth ten thousand dollars to me."

It was Black Bear who spoke, his voice sounding hoarse and hollow beneath his hairy mask. Allacotah was a chief of power and distinction, but Black Bear was his superior—hence the latter's authoritative, indignant command.

Silver Voice, with the assistance of Allacotah, began the task of restoring the captive to consciousness. Water was brought from a spring hard by and the brow of the maiden bathed. A cordial made of some wild herbs was administered, and by a vigorous chafing of the limbs and temples, Silvia was brought back to life.

"Put her in there," said Black Bear, pointing with his claw clad finger to Silver Voice's lodge; "the presence of so many warriors might excite her too much. She must have rest and food."

Allacotah lifted her in his strong arms and carried her into the lodge where Silver Voice had arranged a neat, comfortable couch of skins. Laying her upon the couch, the chief went out, leaving the two women alone.

Silvia opened her eyes and gazed around.

There was a fat-lamp, made in a rude stone bowl, burning in the lodge, and by it Silvia was enabled to see where she was. All around her were an air of neatness. The floor of the lodge was laid with a carpet of buffalo-robes, and the walls of the cone-shaped structure were hung with beautiful tapestry of buckskin, highly and artistically ornamented. Strands of wampum, stuffed birds of beautiful plumage, curious figures carved from wood and stone were arranged around the walls. The only object of civilization to be seen was a small, cracked mirror.

When the captive saw the beautiful Indian woman bending over her with tears in her eyes, her heart beat with gentle hope.

"Rest easy, dear girl," said Silver Voice, kindly, "you are greatly fatigued."

"Where am I? and who are you with the tender voice and angelic face?" asked Silvia, rising to a sitting posture and gazing around, her mind still confused and bewildered.

"You are in the encampment of Allacotah, and I am Silver Voice, Allacotah's wife."

"Where is Black Bear?"

"The inhuman wretch is out by the camp-fire," the woman replied, bitterly.

Silvia was surprised by her manner of speech. She saw that the Indian woman entertained a feeling of intense dislike toward the chief.

"Then you do not respect the great chief," said Silvia, "judging from your remarks."

"No, I hate him!" she fairly hissed, "the inhuman, merciless outcast of his own race!"

"And do not his warriors like him?" asked Silvia.

"Yes; those whose hearts are vile as his," Silver Voice answered, "and, dear girl," she continued, coming closer and speaking lower, "if it's in my power, and the power of Allacotah, you shall never, never suffer captivity at his hands!"

Silvia's face brightened; then it became clouded again as she said:

"But he told me he was going to sell me to a robber-captain—that the robber had promised him a great reward for me, but how a robber captain here in the Black Hills knew me is quite a mystery."

"Did he mention the robber captain's name?"

"Yes; I believe it was Dungarvon—Duval Dungarvon."

"God have mercy!" exclaimed the woman frantically. "Duval Dungarvon! Duval Dungarvon! Oh, dear girl, better take your own life than fall into the hands of that man. He is a fiend, a devil! It is not your beauty, nor his love for you that makes him desirous of possessing you, but it is to torture you, and grind, grind your father's heart out for revenge—bitter, bitter, BITTER revenge!" and the beautiful woman fairly raved in her excitement.

Silvia was completely mystified by her strange words—her wild emotion.

"I do not understand you, Silver Voice," she said.

Before the Indian woman could reply, a wild commotion among the savages outside arrested her attention. She turned and went out, and Silvia involuntarily arose and followed her.

The women were greatly surprised to see the savages, their faces convulsed with horror—their eyes lifted upward with a terrified stare, speechless and motionless. Following the direction indicated by their startled gaze, the women became equally as terrified.

And why?

Down the valley from the north floated in the air high above the tree-tops—far above the reach and power of man, an awful figure—the figure of a human skeleton, its ghastly proportions revealed by the flame and smoke emitted from the great sunken eyes the distended nostrils, and wide, grinning mouth. Great white arms beat and buffeted the air like the wings of a struggling vampire, while scream after scream rent the air.

It was the Aerial Demon of the Mountain, the scourge of the Black Hills—the terror of the Indian.

Silvia's face became white with terror, and she clung to Silver Voice for support.

"Come into the lodge, dear girl," said the chief's wife, "it is the Aerial Demon."

They turned toward the door of the little cone shaped structure. Just then the clatter of iron-shod hoofs coming up the stony valley caught their ears. They stopped.

The next instant a white man, mounted upon a mettlesome animal, dashed from the gloom and stopped so quickly by the side of the terrified women, that his animal was thrown back upon its haunches.

It was Rodger Rainbolt, the ranger!

Before Black Bear and his savages could draw their attention from the Aerial Demon—which in a moment, almost, had passed over the camp and disappeared—the daring ranger leaned forward in his stirrups, placed his arm about Silvia's waist, lifted her from the ground as though she had been an infant, whirled his animal southward and dashed away into the gloom of the forest, pursued by Black Bear and his warriors.

As the ranger turned his animal he gave Silver Voice one quick glance that seemed to pierce her to the heart. She threw up her hands, clutched wildly at space, uttered a low, convulsive sob, and sunk unconscious into the arms of her husband, Allacotah.

CHAPTER VI. THE HIDDEN HOME.

AWAY through the dark wood and down the mountain d-dle the ranger dashed with his precious burden.

Silvia uttered no word of fear, no cry of pain. She had caught a glimpse of the ranger's noble, handsome face as he lifted her from the ground in the Indian encampment, and, as if by magic, her heart became inspired with confidence in him.

"Fear not, Miss Sanford!" the stranger breathed in her ear when they had fairly cleared the Indian encampment; "you are safe with a friend."

"A friend—a noble, daring friend, yet a stranger that knows my name," replied Silvia, in a voice slightly agitated.

"That's true, Miss Sanford; but I learned your name from your father."

"Father!" exclaimed the maiden. "Oh, where and when did you see my father?"

"I saw him less than twenty-four hours ago, but many miles from here. He was in search of you."

"Thank Heaven!" breathed the maiden; "but who am I indebted to for my rescue and the information?"

"My name is Rodger Rainbolt; I am a ranger, a rude, rough man of the plains."

"Your bravery and unselfishness, Mr. Rainbolt, are nobler virtues than the cultivated politeness of refinement."

"You flatter me, Miss Sanford, and I hope it is rightfully bestowed," was the reply, and then both became silent for a time.

Presently they emerged from the dark forest into an open and level plain through which wound a little stream like a silver thread. All around it arose a dark belt of wooded hills like a beautiful landscape set in a rusty frame.

Away to the north could be heard the roar of falling water.

The blue mist that hung over the mountain at the beginning of night had cleared away from the face of the sky, and the great round moon looked out in all its queenly splendor, lighting up the little valley with a soft, dreamy light.

Halting on the summit of a little knoll overlooking the plain, the ranger lifted Silvia to the ground, and then, dismounting himself, stood by her side.

"We rest here," he said. "Look yonder, and tell me what you see."

"I can see a broad, silvery surface, resembling a tiny lake, sleeping there, just where the black wood begins."

"It is not a lake, Miss Sanford, but a broad sheet of water falling over a high jutting rock, in which is my cavern home—my castle."

Silvia felt a chill creep over her frame as she thought: "What if he is a robber, or an escaped criminal—a base villain, leading me into his lair; but no; it can not be possible that an evil heart lies concealed behind that noble, handsome face. He has saved me from the tortures of Indian captivity, or perhaps a worse fate, and I will not entertain for a moment one disrespectful thought of him."

"I should think you would get lonesome there, Mr. Rainbolt," she finally said.

"That may all be," he replied, gravely. "But I can do no better, and I offer you the hospitality of my secluded home—that is, if you have no scruples of going there alone with me."

"Why should I, Mr. Rainbolt, when to you I owe my life? I feel perfectly free—yes, proud, to trust your honesty, manhood and protection."

"I sincerely hope you will never have cause to feel otherwise, though, were there any settlements or residences within forty miles I would take you there at once. But there is none nearer than those on Laramie plains, fifty miles distant."

"But should you take me there, I would not, in all probability, meet father for a long time."

"That's true, Miss Sanford; but would you prefer riding to walking across this plain to the creek?"

"No, I had rather walk, as I am much fatigued with riding already."

"Then I will turn my horse to pasture here," said the ranger, removing the saddle and bridle from the animal, which at once began cropping the rich, succulent grass.

Having removed the capacious saddle-bags from the saddle, he concealed the caparisons in a small cavity in the knoll on which they were standing, and then, slinging the saddle bags across his shoulder, he took Silvia's hand and set off across the little valley.

It was only a few moments' walk, and when the stream was reached the ranger drew a small canoe from under some drooping willows, and launched it. In a moment he was seated therein, with his fair companion, and taking up the paddle, drove the little craft out into the middle

of the stream; then turned and moved up its course.

So swift, so easily did the canoe glide over the rippling waters that Silvia for a moment forgot the surrounding danger, and conversed with her handsome rescuer with a real sense of joy and admiration.

Presently the sullen roar of falling waters reached their ears.

"It is the Crystal Falls, Miss Sanford, that you hear," said the ranger; "we will soon be there."

In a few moments more the falls burst upon their view like a great silver curtain suspended against a black wall.

In the rock, over which the waters fell like a great apron, was the ranger's secret home, the water concealing from view the entrance, which could only be reached by passing through the descending torrent.

"Behind that wall of water, Miss Sanford, is my home, and to reach it we must pass through the descending sheet; and as it will be pitchy dark beyond, and the windings of the cavern are difficult to follow, I had better go in alone, light a torch, and return to you. You can wait there upon that rock, can you not?"

"Oh, certainly," replied Silvia, springing to her feet.

Alongside the canoe was a rock, some three feet across, and projecting several inches above the surface of the stream. Upon this Silvia stepped to await the ranger's return. He took up the paddle and drove the canoe forward, and when he had disappeared in the mist and spray, a feeling akin to terror crept over the maiden. But she could only wait—listen to the roar of the falls and the black waters chafing the rock on which she stood. And as she lifted her eyes and followed the dark summit of the ridge that rose up before her, what dark objects were those she saw moving athwart the clear sky?

They were savages, though Silvia did not know it.

Presently a light streamed through the mist and falling water, and looking, Silvia saw that the latter had been parted near the middle, and about ten feet above the stream by some contrivance of the ranger, and that the light was burning in the mouth of the cavern, several feet beyond.

In a moment the canoe with the ranger shot out through the opening and came alongside the rock where Silvia stood. Assisting her in as though she had been a child, the kind-hearted ranger took a gum blanket that he had brought from the cavern, and wrapped it, hood like, over her head and shoulders, that the spray and dropping water might not drench her. He then took up the paddle and drove the canoe through the mist and vapor, between the parted waters of the falls, and as far beyond as the water had backed beneath the jutting rock.

"Here we are, Miss Sanford," said Rainbolt, removing the blanket from Silvia's head and shoulders.

She glanced around and above. A glaring pine torch, fixed in a niche in the wall, lit up the place. From the rim of the canoe a spiral row of stone steps led up into the great rock. Overhead the rocky ceiling was studded with countless numbers of stalactites, on the sharp points of which hung drops of water that flashed like so many diamonds. Here and there a little jet of water poured down in ribbons of foam.

"This," said the ranger, pointing to a kind of sweep fixed upon a pivot, and reaching out like a great arm, "is what I divide the waters of the falls with, while I am passing in and out of the cavern. By allowing that end to hang down as it does, it reaches through the descending sheet of water and divides it as it now is; and then by simply lowering this end and hoisting that, thus, the waters close and flow on just as they did before.

He took her hand and assisted her from the boat, and then, lifting the glowing torch from the wall, they began ascending the rude stone steps. The ascent required much care and time, for the stones were easily displaced and a single misstep might prove fatal; but, finally, the top was reached and a dark, capacious chamber was spread out before them. The ranger stopped and held the torch above his head.

Silvia started back with a low cry of terror, for the light flashed upon the form of a huge panther crouched at her feet.

"Fear not, Miss Sanford," said the ranger; "he will not harm you. It is Purie, my pet panther, I should have spoken of him before and saved you this sudden affright. Ay, Purie, my pet."

The panther sprang up and capered around its master with apparent joy.

"Oh!" suddenly exclaimed Rainbolt, while caressing the beautiful creature, "I had forgotten that my other pet, Echo, my eagle, is still out. I will conduct you to your room, Miss Sanford, and then call him in."

They moved along the rocky chamber that resounded sepulchral, with their footfalls, the panther skipping playfully before them. Presently they came to where a curtain or partition of skins was stretched from one wall to the other. Lifting one corner of it they passed beyond.

"Now," said the ranger, with a smile of embarrassment, "you are in the kitchen of Rodger Rainbolt, your humble servant. You will not find things here, even as you would in a bachelor's kitchen in Omaha, but men are poor housekeepers, you know."

Silvia was surprised with the neatness of the apartment, and the order and variety of its furniture; but she said nothing, fearing that the ranger might construe her language of praise as that of unmeaning and polite compliment.

Another partition of skins hanging at right-angles with the first, separated the kitchen from another apartment, into which the ranger conducted the maiden.

"This," he said, "is my sitting-room, parlor, bedroom and library all combined. And now, pray be seated, Miss Sanford, and make yourself at home while I go and bring my eagle up. You see I think a great deal of my pets," and lighting a lamp that sat near, he turned and went out.

The apartment in which the young girl now found herself was far more comfortable than could have been expected under the circumstances, and was well lighted by a large lamp of stone filled with bear's oil. In a short time the ranger returned, bringing in the eagle, and then announced his intention of preparing supper, asking Silvia to be seated until his return.

In the course of an hour he again entered, bearing in his hands a rude but ample repast, and with appetite sharpened by the long ride, they partook of, and thoroughly enjoyed the meal.

After supper was over, the ranger made known to his guest the programme he had adopted for her restoration to her father, which met her hearty approval. She was to remain there until he could find her father and bring him there, or take her to where he was.

By this time the night was near, and the ranger, seeing that the eyes of his guest were growing heavy for want of sleep, arose and, turning to leave the room, said:

"As you are doubtless sleepy and fatigued, Miss Sanford, you can appropriate this room and that pallet of furs, such as it is, for your own sleeping-apartment, and retire whenever you feel so disposed."

He bid her good-night and went into the other apartment, where he constructed him a couch and laid down, his panther curled down at his feet and his eagle perched in a niche in the rocky wall.

Having offered up a fervent prayer to her Heavenly Father, Silvia sought her couch and soon she was wrapt in a sound, refreshing slumber.

CHAPTER VII.

AN IRISHMAN'S RUSE.

THE greatest excitement prevailed in the hunters' camp over the sudden, mysterious death of Wayland Sanford. Everything within the young doctor's power was done in hopes of restoring him to life, but all to no purpose. His limbs were cold and stiff, and his eyes, though wide open, had that stony, glassy stare, and his face the ghastly pallor of the dead.

"It's no use, boys; he's gone," said the young doctor; "his death by apoplexy was caused by over-exertion and mental excitement."

"Poor uncle Wayland!" sighed Frank. "We have all been afraid of this for years. He was a victim of the heart-disease, and had a nervous and excitable temperament to aggravate it, and alas! the abduction of his daughter, the wearisome pursuit without food and rest, and finally, that paper placed in his hand by the ranger, did the work."

"But why should it?" asked young Lyman.

"That's what I cannot tell," replied Frank. "Uncle Wayland has been a man of the world—has spent much of his life away from home among strangers, in California, in Pike's Peak, in the army upon the frontier, and to me his life has been a sealed book—a secret volume in which this very Rainbolt may be an important character."

The lifeless form was placed upon a blanket

near the fire, the rigid limbs straightened out, and the pale hands folded across his breast.

Ebony Jim burst into a paroxysm of sorrow, as he looked down upon the pale face of the colonel.

"What is he to you, more than a stranger, Ebony? and why do you mourn over him?" asked Willis.

"Oh, good Lor'! and wasn't he de father of poor Florence Walraven?"

"And what about Florence? what do you know of her?"

"Why, wasn't she de wife of Warren Walraven? and wasn't poor Massa Walraven de good master ob dis poor, black nigger?"

"And what about your master and the Devil's Tarn of which he forbade you speaking?"

"Oh, good Lor'! don't ask dat," the negro replied, glancing toward the form of the colonel. "I fears him," pointing to the dead.

"He is dead; you need not fear him now."

"De spirit ain't dead—no, no; I'll tells you some time, not now."

Ebony was obstinate, and as Frank could elicit no information from him he turned away, greatly mystified.

By this time day was breaking, and before long the sun arose clear and warm.

Flick O'Flynn went out in search of food for breakfast, and soon returned with a quarter of deer-meat. A fire was struck and a great quantity of the venison roasted.

Breakfast over, a sad duty was to be performed—the duty of interring the colonel's body.

An hour was spent in digging a shallow grave; the dirt being loosened with hunting-knives and thrown out by the hands. The form of the colonel was now wrapped in a blanket taken from the shoulders of one of the dead Indians, his face covered with his hat, and then laid away in the narrow sepulcher.

This sad duty performed, a council was held, and after due consideration it was decided that Frank Armond and Walter Lyman, with the Irishman, should pursue a southward direction through the Black Hills, while Willis Armond and Ralph Rodman, accompanied by Ebony Jim, should take a southwesterly course, and in case they did not overtake the savages before they reached their village, they were all to meet at a certain point near the stronghold known to the hunters, when they would make other arrangements.

Scarcely an hour after their departure, a score of savages emerged from the forest into the little glade, and, as their eyes fell upon the lifeless forms of their friends lying around, they uttered a wild, revengeful cry, and turning, they glided away into the woods like so many blood-hounds, directly upon the trail of the white men.

The course of Flick O'Flynn and party lay through the heart of the Black Hills, and over a rough, mountainous region, but they pushed rapidly ahead, hoping to overtake the savages before reaching the village.

The first day's travel found them but fifteen miles from where they had started in the morning. At the end of the second day's journey, they went into camp about two miles from the Medicine Bow river.

Almost wearied out, Walter and Frank stretched themselves upon the ground to walk over their serious predicament, while the Irishman struck a fire by which to prepare supper. But unfortunately, when the fire was struck there was nothing to prepare for supper, so O'Flynn proposed to go in search of game, leaving the young men at camp.

In a few moments after his departure, the young unskilled sportsmen seemed to forget the caution enjoined upon them by the hunter, and producing a pack of cards, concluded to indulge in the pleasant pastime of "seven-up," until the loquacious friend and guide returned. However, the beginning of the game seemed to have been ominous of evil, for at that moment, four dark figures glided from the deepening shadows of the woods with a hideous yell, and ere the young men had time to realize the "run of the game," they were stretched upon the ground and bound hand and foot, prisoners in the hands of the Cheyennes.

Having secured their prisoners they set off toward the river, compelling the whites, with their hands tied behind their backs, to walk in advance.

In the mean time Flick was continuing his hunt.

He had pursued his course across the bottom to the river without finding any game, and turning he proceeded down the stream. He had gone but a short distance in this direction when

he spied a large canoe with a solitary Indian in it, moored near the bank. The savage evidently was waiting for some one, judging from the impatient look he would now and then flash into the woods at his side. Simultaneous with the discovery of the Indian, the Irishman heard a loud yell in the direction of the camp, and well he knew its import. But, to be certain, he turned and hastened back toward his friends, and as he neared the camp he saw that his fears were confirmed. Frank and Walter were prisoners and were being conducted through the forest toward the river.

The savages were going directly toward that point on the river where he had seen the Indian in the canoe, and he knew full well that he was one of the same party. So, turning, he ran with all possible speed back to the river. He reached the bank several rods above where the Indian still sat in the canoe, and, dropping upon his hands and knees, he began crawling down toward the red-skin.

It was his object to put the savage out of the way, and as he did not wish to raise an alarm by firing his gun, he resolved to trust to his shillalah.

The Indian was seated with his face down the stream, and, as Flick approached him, he discovered him to be a half-breed. He was dressed in an old ragged suit of clothes, no doubt taken from some white victim. An old straw hat surmounted his head, with what little there remained of the brim lopped down over his eyes almost concealing his face.

Flick crawled on with the silence of a shadow, and had nearly reached the canoe when his foot caught in a vine and he was thrown heavily to the ground, making no little confusion. An involuntary oath escaped his lips as he sprang up and prepared to flee, but to his surprise he saw the Indian never moved.

"Success to mees' plan, he's dafel!" muttered the hunter, and he moved on toward the red-skin.

He had almost succeeded in reaching the water's edge when the savage turned his head and saw him. In a moment the red-man snatched up his tomahawk from the bottom of the canoe and hurled it at the head of the Irishman. But the latter divined his intention, and falling flat upon his face in the sand, the weapon passed harmlessly over. The savage did not utter a single word nor sound, and it was quite evident now that he was both deaf and dumb.

"And sth'll so much the better," exclaimed the Irishman, and quicker than thought he sprang up and into the canoe, and giving the half-breed a tap on the head, settled him down perfectly unconscious.

In a minute the Irishman had stripped him of his ragged clothes and donned them himself. As the Indian was the largest man, he (Flick) had no trouble in putting the clothes on over his own, and with the two suits on he appeared fully as large as the red-skin and equally as woeful.

Flick then saw a little bark canoe resting under some willows that fringed the bank. Drawing it out he placed the unconscious half-breed therein and sent him adrift, knowing that ere he recovered his senses he would be far enough away.

So far things had worked like a charm, and having smeared his face and hands with a pigment of dark clay, and drawing the old bat-brim down over his eyes, the disguise was completed, trusting to the gathering twilight to hide all imperfections.

Flick now concealed his shillalah under his ragged coat, his rifle under the seat of the capacious canoe, and then, procuring the savage's tomahawk, took his seat in the canoe.

By this time it was nearly dark, and, inasmuch as Flick was to play the part of a deaf and dumb Indian, he felt perfectly safe in his daring feat to rescue his friends, but, when he saw the savages emerge from the woods and approach the canoe, his heart almost ceased to beat through fear of being detected.

CHAPTER VIII. ENTRAPPED.

THROUGH his perfect knowledge of the country, Ebony Jim with his party succeeded in making about twenty miles the first day. They then encamped on the edge of a small glade, on three sides of which arose the dark woods, while on the fourth side a tall, jutting rock, some fifty feet high, frowned down on the little glade. At the base of this rock our friends selected their camp, which would not only afford a shelter from the heavy, chilly dew, but a protection from an Indian attack in the rear.

Something like an hour had passed, during which time Willis and Ralph had expressed a wish for a little excitement to keep them awake. In the mean time the practiced eyes of Ebony had espied several dark forms moving to and fro along the edge of the timber, but within its shadow.

That they meant harm the negro knew well enough, and he resolved at once to make them "show their hand." Saying nothing, he crept out of the camp, and securing good cover, awaited the red-skins' approach. Not long did he wait, however, for soon the head and breast of a red-painted warrior appeared, scanning the glade camp with basilisk eyes.

Ebony was on the alert with a novel weapon—a round stone of the size of a hen's egg. Without noise, he threw the stone with wonderful power and precision, striking the savage square in the forehead, and without a groan the Cheyenne fell forward upon his face—a dead man.

"Hi, hi!" the negro chuckled, "guess dat imp's squaw'll be waitin' a good while for her next beatin'."

Not another savage appeared, and Ebony returned to camp to watch and wait.

Two or three hours passed without any demonstration on the part of the savages, and the watchful whites began to congratulate themselves on their enemies having withdrawn, when suddenly the whole heavens over them became lit up with the glare of the midday sun, and the next moment a great ball of dry, matted pine brush came rolling over the edge of the cliff, wrapped in a sheet of red, hissing flame.

It fell at the feet of our friends, lighting up their hiding-place with a blinding glare, and exposing them to the savages' aim, while to them all was inky gloom beyond the radius of light made by the burning brush.

There was no alternative but to take to the woods.

"Follow dis nigga', boys!" exclaimed Ebony, springing from under the rock, and rushing across the opening.

Willis and Ralph did as commanded, and they all would have succeeded in reaching the shelter of the wood safely, but, unfortunately, Ralph stumbled, and before he could gain his feet, he was seized by a number of savages that lay in ambush near, and made prisoner.

Ebony and Willis saw their companion captured, but, as they could render no assistance against such fearful odds, they dashed on and made good their escape into the woods.

They could hear the yells of the Indians back at the cliff, and to ascertain what was going on they crept back to a point of observation. They saw the red-skins, a score in number, grouped around the captive under the edge of the cliff, but of course they could not tell what disposition they were going to make of him.

For some time the negro sat in a deep study. Presently he started up with what he considered a "bright idea," and which he at once communicated to Willis.

Ten minutes later, had the savages under the cliff glanced across the opening, they would have seen the body of their comrade, that was slain by the negro, dragged from the edge of the glade by some invisible power into the clump of shrubbery some ten feet away. This was done by Ebony fixing the screw of his ramrod in a long pole which he slid along upon the ground until it came in contact with the savage's body; he then twisted the screw into the dead fellow's garments, and dragged him into the brush—for what purpose will soon be shown.

The savages did not notice the disappearance of their comrade's body, so intent were they in the council that was being held to determine the fate of their captive. Some were in favor of tomahawking him on the spot, some of burning him, and some one thing and some another. Finally, it was settled that the captive select his own choice of death, from burning, the tomahawk, and jumping from the cliff overhead.

The choice was rather a difficult one. Death by the tomahawk and jumping from the cliff would be instantaneous, while by burning, his chances of being rescued by Ebony and Willis would be prolonged as well as his suffering. And so he took his choice of death by burning at the stake.

The captive's hands were free, but his legs were bound so tightly that the bonds cut the flesh, and in this manner he was compelled to stand perfectly motionless.

In a moment all hands were busied in erecting a stake in the center of the glade, gathering fuel and making other preparations for the grand torture; and while thus engaged, a voice

suddenly rung out on the night air, clear and distinct:

"Seize the rope, Rodman—seize the rope!"

All eyes were drawn involuntarily toward the woods across the moonlight opening, whence the voice had emanated, and at that instant Ralph Rodman, the doomed captive, arose from the ground, floated upward, upward through the air—up along the face of the cliff; and when the savages again turned, they found he had vanished from their midst like mist before the morning sun—gone they knew not where; but, suddenly, a great black object leaped from the edge of the cliff overhead, and falling in their midst crushed half their number to atoms. It was a huge stone, rolled over the cliff by Ebony Jim, who had also saved Ralph by drawing him up with a rope made of the dead Indian's buckskin garments, and lowered at the moment that the savages' attention was drawn toward the woods.

Thus Ebony's "bright idea" had proved a success. While Willis remained in the woods to draw the attention of the savages, at the same time warn Ralph of their presence, the negro had crept around to the top of the cliff, and at the instant Willis called out, he dropped one end of the rope, and as it fell plump on Ralph's head, he had his friend's command forcibly and instantly impressed upon his mind, and seizing hold of the rope he was drawn up to the top of the cliff—saved.

Without loss of time they hurried from the place, and two hours' travel brought them to the mouth of a large cave, where they at once concluded to spend the night.

They ventured to strike a fire now, for they were wet and chilly with the heavy dew. They were just within the mouth of the cavern, and as the fire lighted up the surrounding gloom, it revealed the dark opening back into the hill.

Ralph and Willis at once determined to explore the cavern. Ebony remonstrated, but as he could give no reason for his objections, the young adventurers procured a torch and set out, leaving the negro to stand guard at the entrance.

Led on by the increasing wonders and magnificence of the place, they threaded the winding passage for several hundred feet, when they emerged into a wide, capacious chamber.

Here they halted and held the torch above their heads.

"Hist! didn't you hear footsteps?" exclaimed Willis, suddenly.

"Fudge! no; you're getting nervous," returned Ralph, "and imagine you hear the footsteps of ghosts. Come, let us look further, old boy. No superstition—Heavens!"

The last exclamation was caused by a sound in the narrow passage resembling the rolling of a heavy body on trucks. It came from the passage behind them, and filled with no little fear and curiosity, they turned and began to retrace their footsteps.

They had gone but a few steps when they heard the hollow, rumbling noise again, and what was their surprise and horror to see an immense rock slide out from the great wall and completely block their passage.

Ralph raised the torch above his head and turned to Willis, speechless with terror.

At that instant a wild, demoniac laugh of triumph, that seemed to issue from the lips of a legion of fiends, greeted the young men's ears as it echoed through the hollow chambers of the cavern.

They were entrapped in the den of mountain robbers!

In the meanwhile Ebony Jim, hearing the yells of laughter proceeding from the interior, quickly divined the cause, and knowing that he could be of no assistance to the young men, dashed off at a great speed into the forest.

For several hours he pursued his way, his intention being to hunt up Flick O'Flynn, and daylight found him many miles from the robbers' cave.

He had begun to feel satisfied that he had escaped his white enemies when, as he was passing through a narrow defile, his ear caught the sound of footsteps, and the next instant he saw three dark figures coming directly toward him.

Quick as thought he swung himself upward into the branches of a thick tree, and lying at length upon a large limb, he anxiously awaited the approach of the party.

CHAPTER IX.

"SOLOMON STRANGE, MY LORD."

Two days Silvia had passed in the ranger's home. Two days the ranger had spent in fruitless search of her father among the wilds of the Black Hills. But the kind-hearted man had

every reason to believe that he would yet find him, and encouraged the maiden's impatient spirits by the tenderest words of hope.

With his eagle he had left the cavern in the morning, and after a hard day's ride returned at night.

The third day Rainbolt set out upon his mission, in which he had begun to feel a strange interest.

It was toward noon that, while ascending a steep hill, he came suddenly face to face with a strange-looking individual who had come from the other side of the ridge.

The stranger stopped directly in front of the ranger, as if he were going to dispute his passage. Rainbolt drew rein and scanned the fellow from head to foot.

He was tall, standing fully six feet in his moccasins, with an ungainly form, and eyes whose color could not be defined in the shadow of their scraggy, beetling brows. The complexion of his face was a dirty yellow, though it was almost hidden beneath its growth of grizzly gray whiskers that reached to the man's waist.

Altogether he was a wretched specimen of humanity, and Rainbolt could not suppress a smile as he took in his doleful figure.

The strange creature carried a huge knotted club, with which he menaced the ranger.

"What is your name?" asked the fierce-looking man, abruptly.

"My name is Rodger Rainbolt—who are you?"

"Solomon Strange, my lord," the man replied, boastfully. "I am just from 'Merry England' across the water, the water."

"A foreigner," replied the ranger; "and what brings you here, Mr. Strange?"

"Ho! ho! ho! my lord," he laughed, with an imbecile leer; "a love for the chase brings me here. In Merry England across the water, I was game-keeper to Oliver Cromwell. Do you know you look so much like my lord Oliver, that I can't help calling you my lord? Surely, you are some relation to him, to him, my lord."

"None at all," replied the ranger, much amused; "but you are an aged man to have lived in Cromwell's time."

"So I am, so I am, my lord; but the swiftest that ever came from the land of the Orient—the swiftest of all save your half-brother the Lightning's bolt."

"Crazy," muttered the scout, to himself, "crazy as a loon." Then he said aloud:

"You are a wonderful man, Solomon Strange."

"So I am, so I am, my lord Oliver—Thunderbolt, I mean; and I can read the past and future to you, my lord, like an open book, an open book."

"Then perhaps you can tell me where those are I seek?" said the ranger, humoring his crazy whims.

"Those are I seek," the man repeated; "yes, yes, yes; there are five of them, but you need not hunt, my lord. One of them lies dead and buried where you last saw him, and the others are scattered through the mountains."

The ranger would have been surprised had he known how truthfully the man had spoken, whether gifted with the power of second sight or not.

Solomon Strange was silent for a moment, then he continued:

"I see you doubt my words, my lord, for you do not know whether I speak the truth or not; but try me—ask me other questions—such as you will know whether I answer truthfully, truthfully, my lord."

"Then tell me for what I seek those persons, or something touching my past."

"I can tell you something of both, of both, my lord," said the man, closing his sunken eyes and grasping the knotted staff in both hands.

"In the first question I see a beautiful girl, with golden ringlets and soft blue eyes. Ay, do I not, my lord, do I not?"

The ranger started with surprise. Before he could speak, Strange continued:

"Yes, yes, it is so, my lord; I see the answer upon your flushed face; and now your past, your past, my lord. Ay, it is gloomy, gloomy. I see trouble and sorrow in the 'crow's feet' about your eyes, your eyes, do I not?"

"Never mind; go on, go on," replied the ranger, with a strange curiosity.

Strange continued:

"Yes, trouble and sorrow in the crow's feet, and what beyond! Ay, a group of men, a military tribunal, a cashiered captain, and who is that wending his way through the hills, the hills? Now, now I see, my lord; it is the captain, the cashiered captain; and now, what do

I see, see emerge from the woods and seize the captain? Ay, it's a legion of dusky fiends, fiends, and then, oh, then, what beyond that, my lord? A canoe, a canoe drifting, drifting down a wild mountain stream, and in it lies the cashiered captain bound hand and foot, and the canoe with the captain is drifting, drifting toward what? Ay, toward death—the falls, the falls—Oh, God! he has gone over, and all beyond is black, black as—"

The man's words were here cut short by a bullet whizzing in close proximity to his head, closely followed by the report of a rifle. Throwing up his hands, he exclaimed:

"Away, Rainbolt! away! the fiends, the fiends are after you again. Save yourself for the girl's sake!" and turning, the man glided away into the forest.

At this instant, Echo, the eagle, appeared over his master's head, and uttered a wild scream which the ranger knew to be his signal of approaching danger, and speaking to his animal, he dashed away down the stony hill with a score of mounted Cheyennes thundering after him.

The ranger shaped his course back toward his hidden home, for the language of the madman, Solomon Strange, had so fearfully impressed his mind that he could not pursue the search for Silvia's father until he had time for reflection.

After an hour's hard riding he entered a level, wooded valley, through which wound the waters of Lodge Pole creek.

He now reined his noble animal to a walk, inasmuch as he had distanced his pursuers, but, suddenly, his eagle came swooping down with the warning cry of danger, and again he rode on at the top of his animal's speed.

He had gone thus some two miles, when he suddenly dashed from the thick timbers into an open plain, and what was his surprise to find himself in the outskirts of an Indian village.

It required but a single glance to see that the Indians were Cheyennes, and great was his surprise to see Black Bear among them.

The ranger's situation was precarious. He could not turn back without running into the power of those he was fleeing from; nor could he turn to the right nor the left on account of the almost perpendicular hills on one side and the creek on the other. So there was no alternative but to ride directly through the heart of the village, and drawing his saber and giving his animal the reins, he dashed on.

He was half-way through the village ere the savages discovered the daring ranger in their midst, and was gone like the wind, before they had recovered sufficiently to pursue.

CHAPTER X.

A MIDNIGHT BURIAL.

FRANK and Walter's captors advanced toward the canoe in which Flick O'Flynn sat, and great was the Irishman's relief when he saw that they did not penetrate his disguise.

For several moments the deaf and dumb Indian capered around the two young men, hoping to give them a signal, but unfortunately for him, in cutting these pranks, Walter gave him a kick in the stomach that fairly doubled him on the beach.

Presently one of the savages motioned for his supposed deaf and dumb comrade to take a seat in the stern of the canoe, which he accordingly did with a jump.

The captives were then placed on the seat next to him, facing the same way. Two of the savages with tomahawks seated themselves facing the captives, while the other two took up the paddles.

"Holy Vargin!" muttered the Irishman to himself, as the canoe shot out, "what if wees overtake the canoe with the rhyale Mr. Lo into it? I niver thought of that—wirral!"

And this they were quite likely to do, for they moved rapidly down the stream. However, Flick was not long in making mental preparations for the emergency that was sure to come—and which did come sooner than he thought for.

In less than half an hour the canoe rounded an abrupt bend in the stream, and but a few rods in advance of them Flick saw the Indian that he had sent adrift sitting up in the canoe and gesticulating in an excited manner with one hand while with the other he was trying to paddle the little craft up the stream. Quick as a flash Flick arose to his feet and pointed in an excited manner toward the savage. The two guards turned quickly around to see what the mute wished to call their attention to, and at that instant the Irishman drew his shillalah from under his coat, and reaching forward over

the captives' heads, dealt the savages a blow on the head that sent them heels over head into the Medicine Bow. And then he uttered a yell, and springing over the captives' heads, served the two oarsmen a blow on the head that caused them to release their hold on the oars and sink down quietly and unconscious at his feet.

"Ay, now," exclaimed the supposed mute Indian, turning to the wondering captives, "it was a lick on the head wid me shillalah that made mees known to the rhyed bla'guards, and shill I make meeself known to yees bl nd j ck-asses the same?"

"Flick, as I am a confounded fool!" exclaimed Frank.

"And it's a purty mess yees hev got into," said the Irishman, cutting their bonds.

In the mean time the real mute Indian had succeeded in reaching the shore and making his escape.

Flick now pitched the two unconscious oarsmen out into the water, and taking the paddle, sent the craft flying down the stream.

In a few minutes an island densely covered with timber was reached, and the party landed and drew the canoe up on the beach.

The trio did not strike a fire for fear of attracting the attention of the Indians, should any be lurking in the vicinity, and so they were compelled to go without supper.

Seating themselves in the shadow of the undergrowth, where they could not be seen, they entered into conversation; but this was soon interrupted by the sound of paddles.

Rising to their feet and looking up-stream, they discovered a canoe containing four men coming down toward the island.

They listened and discovered that they were whites, but not feeling free to make known their presence until they ascertained whether they were friends or foes, or whether they were going to land on the island or not, they took their weapons and climbed up a large tree that stood in the center of the island and concealed themselves among the thick boughs, where they could command a view of the canoe and its occupants.

The canoe landed in a few moments, and then came an exclamation:

"Hello, boys, here's a canoe! and what if sum'un is onter the island?"

"Heavens!" exclaimed another, in a tone of fear, "s'pose you go look 'round an' see."

"S'pose you go to the devil, Phil Grabb!" replied the first speaker. "Do you think thiet Ebenezer Frogfoot's goin' to be a fool and venter cut thar alone and git my carcass riddled with bullets? No, sir-ee, you can't come thiet game."

"Ye would if ye wer'n't a coward," returned Grabb.

"Humph! I'll bet all the gold in the—the hills that you're afeard ter walk 'round thiet ere island on't," said the important Ebenezer Frogfoot.

"Ay, now," whispered Flick O'Flynn, "they are robbers as mees is a born Irishman."

"And cowards too," added Walter.

"Yes, but keep still; they may do or say something to our benefit," said Frank.

And so they listened and watched.

The matter of scouting the island was finally settled by all agreeing to go in a body.

So the four brave men got themselves into line and began beating around through the brush, but they found nothing.

"No one here, thank fortune," said one of the robbers; "that canoe has drifted there some time 'r other."

"Then let's bring it ashore," said another, whereupon they all returned to the canoe.

One of their number now lit a lantern, which sent a red beam of light across the island. Two of the men then took up a dark object from the canoe, and following the one with the lantern, advanced toward the interior of the island.

"Here's the spot," said the robber with the light, stopping directly under the tree in which our friends were ensconced.

The two with the burden advanced and placed it on the ground at the foot of the tree.

Our friends started with a shudder at what they saw.

It was a beautiful silver-mounted coffin!

CHAPTER XI.

A MEETING AT THE DEVIL'S TARN.

THE Devil's Tarn and the Crystal Falls were one and the same. The latter name had been given the torrent of Rodger Rainbolt, who, as the reader already knows, dwelt in the secret cavern whose entrance was concealed by the falls. To those dwelling in the mountains—the

hunters, robbers and Indians—the place was known as the Devil's Tarn, and by this name we will call it hereafter.

It was about two hours of midnight on the same day that Rodger Rainbolt had unexpectedly rode into the Indian encampment on Lodge Pole that the figure of a man wrapped in a kind of military cloak, and wearing a broad-brimmed hat and pair of high-topped boots, and carrying a bull's-eye lantern, might have been seen pacing to and fro beneath the boughs of a great pine tree that stood but a few feet from the head of the Devil's Tarn.

Presently his keen ear caught the soft tread of moccasined feet, and the next moment a dark, hairy figure emerged from the black wood and advanced toward him. The man lifted his lantern and flashed it upon the figure of the newcomer.

It was Black Bear, the Cheyenne chief. And the man who held the lantern was Duval Dungarvon, the robber-captain.

"Ay, Duval Dungarvon, and so you're on time," said the chief, seizing the robber by the hand.

"Yes, my handsome Black Bear, I am always up to time; but where's the girl?" replied Dungarvon.

"Gone to the devil," bluntly replied Black Bear.

"Come, now, don't trifle with me, Bluffe Brandon!" exclaimed the robber-captain, fiercely. "I ask you where the girl is?"

"And I tell you she's gone to the devil," returned the chief.

"What do you mean, Brandon?"

"Simply what I say; that infernal white ranger known as Rainbolt rode into camp, picked up your girl, and—"

"And what?" gasped the robber-captain with impatient rage and fury.

"And went—to—the devil with her, as I told you before," returned, with emphasis, the chief.

The robber-captain ground his teeth with rage, stamped his foot with fury, and swore a terrible oath.

"Come, come, Dungarvon! I am going—"

"Yes, yes!" returned Dungarvon, savagely, "you're always going to do something. Just like as any way, the girl's in California by this time."

"Not a bit of it, Captain Duval," returned Black Bear; "that girl is in these 'Hills,' and wherever Rainbolt is, she is also; and I know he is not far away."

"Well, how do you know?"

"Because he rode right through the heart of our encampment to-day, and—"

"And escaped?"

"Yes, escaped."

"Hal hal hal!" laughed the robber-captain, his voice ringing out above the roar of the Devil's Tarn; "well, that beats anything on record. But do you know who that ranger is?"

"Yes, your rival for the hand of Silvia Sanford."

"Curse you, Brandon; if it wasn't for one thing I'd shoot you for your insolence."

"No doubt of it, and it wouldn't be the first man you'd shoot, either," returned Black Bear.

"Well, well, let's talk business, Black Bear. I'm bound to have that girl if I have to wade through fire and brimstone."

"Whew, captain! but you're desperately in love!"

"In love!" sneered the captain; "humph! all I want the girl for is to torture Sanford, for I know he worships her like I did the dark-eyed Inez, her mother. He cheated me out of the other girl, and I'll be hanged if he does this one. But if he could jist yet hold on old Barker he'd be all right; but I'll see to Barker. For two years he has lain in prison up at my ranch, and seems as though he never will die. He's nothing but a living skeleton now, and if I wasn't afraid of needing him some time I'd tumble him into the Dead Gorge. But to business. Now, if you will hunt up and deliver into my hands, at my ranch, within the next week, Silvia Sanford, I will add five thousand more to what I offered you at Omaha. What say you?"

"I'll do it, if it costs me every brave in my tribe," replied Black Bear, excited at the liberal reward of his friend.

"And there is another thing, Brandon," said the robber-chief; "I was thinking that, if you were one of my band, as well as an Indian chief, we could throw our forces together and work to a better advantage."

"And I've been thinkin' that I would like to join your order if it wasn't for your confounded initiatory ceremony."

"I'll admit it does make a fellow a little shaky in the joints," said Dungarvon; "but I'll tell you

what I'll do. If you will meet me to-morrow noon at the Lone Pine, I'll give a synopsis of the 'ceremony,' that you will not be unnerved in case you will join us."

"I'll do it!" returned the renegade emphatically; "to-morrow noon at Lone Pine, and I'll expect you to tell me the truth in regard to the 'ceremony,' for a nice story it would be to get out, that Black Bear, the great Cheyenne chief, had shown the white feather at a ceremony!"

"Hal hal hal! Brandon," laughed Dungarvon; "you are naturally weak in the joints, but let it be understood—to-morrow noon, at Lone Pine."

"I will not fail you, rest assured," said Black Bear.

Dungarvon mounted a horse which he had hitched near, and soon he was thundering away over the stony hills, back to his den.

Black Bear turned and glided away through the woods toward his village, and as he did so, a figure—the figure of a tall man with long, yellow, disheveled hair streaming behind, and carrying a heavy club, crept from the bushes within five feet of where the villains had held their interview, and stole with the silence of a phantom after the chief, his huge club upraised to beat him down.

It was Solomon Strange, the madman.

CHAPTER XII.

SILVIA'S TROUBLES.

SILVIA SANFORD did not spend her days of confinement in the ranger's home in tears and sorrow. Far from it, though she felt anxious and uneasy about her father's safety. She was perfectly contented in the society of the ranger, and his books when he was absent. Too, she had spent much of her time in wandering through the cavern, watching the falls and the beautiful trout that gamboled through the crystal waters.

It was on the morning following the night of Duval Dungarvon and Black Bear's meeting, that the fall were parted a short time after sunrise, and a canoe, in which were the ranger and Silvia, and Echo, the eagle, shot out from under the falls and landed on the left bank of the stream.

The ranger took Silvia by the hand and assisted her on shore, and then led her up the steep, rocky cliff onto the summit of a high ridge overlooking the little valley below, and the distant hills.

He seated himself on a large rock and drew the maiden down by his side.

"Now, Miss Sanford," he said, waving his hand away before him, "you can have a fair view of nature in her fresh morning robes."

Silvia's eyes took in the landscape before her.

"Oh, how grand and beautiful, Mr. Rainbolt," she murmured, softly.

"I was just thinking, Silvia, that if we could always gaze upon the beauties of nature, and enjoy them together as we have this morning, what bliss would be ours."

Silvia's face flushed, and her heart fluttered wildly and yet strangely to her. With a tremulous voice she replied:

"That could never be, Rodger."

"And why not? There is nothing impossible, Silvia."

"I do not understand you," she said.

"Then pardon me, Silvia, for speaking plainly what my heart compels me to say," he said, in a warm, tender voice. "Since I have met you, I have learned to love you, as only a true heart can love. Forgive me, Silvia, but I could not keep back this confession, and I pray you will not feel insulted, or as though I were taking advantage of your helplessness. God forbid."

The maiden's eyes sought the ground shyly. Her heart leaped with strange emotion, but after a few moments' silence, during which the warm color in her cheeks came and went, she looked up and said:

"Why need I disguise my feelings? Oh, Rodger, my heart tells me I love you; but give me one day to answer your question, to—"

"Yes, dear Silvia, a week, a year, since I have heard from your lips that I am loved!" replied the handsome ranger, his face radiant with joy.

There was a momentary silence, broken only by the roar of the falls. The ranger was the first to speak.

"Since my heart feels lighter, dear Silvia, since I have something left in the world to hope for now, I feel like another man, yet I am neglecting my duty to you and so I must leave you now, and go and continue the search for

your father. Shall I accompany you into the cavern before I go?"

"No, no, Rodger, I will remain here a while in the cheerful sunshine, and then I can go down into the cavern alone. Go, and may God speed you," she replied.

The ranger imprinted a warm and ardent kiss upon her brow, then turned, and with Echo perched upon his shoulder, went in search of his pony.

Silvia watched him until he had disappeared; then she seated herself again, and became absorbed in thought.

How long she had remained so she did not know, but presently a soft footstep aroused her from her abstraction.

She arose to her feet and turned quickly around. An Indian woman, whom she at once recognized as Silver Voice, stood before her. Silvia was the first to speak.

"Oh, Silver Voice! it is you who were so kind to me!"

"Yes, dear girl," the woman replied, with much sadness in her voice; "but you are looking happier than when I last saw you."

"Really, Silver Voice, I should be miserable indeed if I had not found a friend," returned Silvia.

"Ah! dear girl, I know why. You have learned to love your handsome rescuer and friend, the ranger, and he loves you. Forgive me, but I stood in that shrubbery and heard his avowal of love and your reply."

Silvia's face flushed with anger.

"Do not get angry," Silver Voice continued, "for it is all for your own good. Let me tell you that if ever you marry Rodger Rainbolt you will rue it to the bitter end."

"Silver Voice," cried Silvia, petulantly, "why do you presume to speak so prophetic? You astound me!"

"I know I do, but I speak the truth."

"What do you know of Mr. Rainbolt, Silver Voice?"

"I know much—oh, God! much!" she cried, in a tone of sudden agony.

"And how do you know it?" questioned Silvia in surprise.

"Take that," Silver Voice said, handing Silvia a folded paper, "and when I am gone read it. It will tell you all you wish to know of Rodger Rainbolt."

"And of you?" questioned Silvia, eagerly.

"No. You do not wish, you do not need to know more of me than you do; but promise me that you will not breathe one word in the paper to the ranger."

"I promise you," said Silvia, scarcely knowing what she was saying.

"Then good-by; you may never see me again," said Silver Voice; and turning, she vanished in the forest like a shadow.

"Strange, mysterious woman," muttered Silvia; "she seems like the vision of a dream to me. But the paper."

She opened it. One side was blank, the other covered with the delicate handwriting of a female.

Silvia's face turned ghastly pale as she glanced at the first words, and by the time she had finished the first line her whole frame was trembling violently. But she read on, read on to the end, and then she uttered a low, convulsive cry, and wrung her hands as though a terrible agony was breaking her heart.

"Oh, my God!" she exclaimed. "Is it possible?"

With her feelings wrought to the highest pitch of excitement, she descended the cliff to the water's edge, and stepped into the canoe to return to the cavern.

As she did so, she did not notice that round, dark ball from which shone a pair of burning orbs, resting on the water, yet concealed under the projecting rim of the canoe; nor did she observe how the craft dragged as it entered beneath the waters when they were parted, with a deadly enemy clinging to its side.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MEANING OF THE COFFIN.

FRANK ARMOND and Walter Lyman felt a chill pass over their frames as they gazed down upon the coffin and the four bulky, rough-looking men standing around it.

The Irishman acted quite easy and indifferent about the matter, as he did on all occasions.

The coffin was small—about the size that a ten year old child would require.

For a moment the robbers gazed at it, then one of them asked:

"Do ye s'pose the body's all right into it?"

"Don't know," was the response. "It moun't

hey got shook around; however, it won't take long ter look," and in a few moments the lid was removed.

The lantern was lowered as the four men bent over the coffin, and our friends in the tree parted the foliage carefully and peered down, eager to get a glimpse of the dead.

And true enough they did. The pale, waxen face of a beautiful child, wrapped in a sheet, was revealed to their startled gaze.

"It's all right," growled one of the robbers.

"Ya-as; put on the lid, and let's git it sunk quick as possible."

While the robber with the knife was screwing on the lid of the coffin, one of the others went to the canoe and brought a shovel, with which he at once began digging a grave.

In a few moments a grave had been dug some three feet deep, and the coffin placed therein, and then covered up—the sods and turfs of grass being replaced so as to conceal every trace of the ground having been disturbed.

"That's it!" exclaimed one of the robbers, when their task was finished; "the duty o' the livin' to the dead is done."

At that instant a wild scream was heard overhead, and looking up the robbers, as well as our friends in the tree, beheld that horrible, mysterious creature—the Aerial Demon—float over the island and disappear down the stream.

It acted like a charm on the rebellious robbers, for they rushed to their canoe, and in a moment were flying upon the stream, fearing to speak above a whisper.

As soon as they were out of sight, our friends descended from the tree.

"Ay, now, and it's a lovely set of critters they ware," said the Irishman; "and it's mees that'll dig up the coffin as soon as daylight comes, and look into the mather a leetle, so I will."

"I'm sure we have seen all that's to be seen," said Walter, "and so let the dead rest."

"There, now, and it's yees that know little av the bloody robber deviltry. There's a thrick in it, now mind."

As the night was quite warm, Walter and Frank laid down upon the ground and soon fell asleep, leaving Flick on guard.

When they awoke in the morning the sun was up, and the first thing they saw was Flick O'Flynn just lifting the coffin out the grave.

"Humph! I suppose you are satisfied now you've dug up the body," said Walter, rising to his feet.

"Nary bit av it, Mishter Walter, I haven't see'd inside yet," said the Irishman, as he began to unscrew the lid.

Walter and Frank came and stood by and watched him perform the operation with no little curiosity. The last screw removed, the lid was lifted and—

There was the pale waxen face of the dead upturned to the clear morning sun, with the flaxen-white hair clustered about the face.

"I suppose you are satisfied now," said Frank.

Flick burst into a loud laugh and replied:

"Ay, and it's blind yees are. Can't yees see the thrick?"

"Thrick? no; what do you mean, O'Flynn?" asked Frank.

"That, now!" replied the Irishman, and he clutched his fingers in the silken hair of the corpse and held up to the astonished gaze of the young men the trunkless head of a wax-figure!

He now laid down the waxen head and proceeded to unroll what appeared the body wrapped in a white sheet. Fold after fold was unrolled, until finally a small leather bag, filled with some hard metal rolled out. Flick seized the bag, and taking up his knife cut it open, and then turning it up he poured into the coffin a great heap of gold coin.

"That's the body," said Flick, a grin of triumph overspreading his broad, florid face.

"Yes, yes, yes," replied Frank, "and a clever trick it is. But why do they take so much trouble in burying their gold?"

"Thinking, thet if any greenhorn like yeeselfs should rhu ag'inst the coffin and open it, see the dead face, or wax figure in't, they would mistrust nothing—put it back and go their way jist as yees would have done in this case."

Flick now filled the leather bag with pebbles, wrapped it in the old ragged clothes taken from the mute half-breed, and stuffed it back into the coffin with the wax-figure. He then consigned the coffin to the earth again—covered it over and smoothed down the sods.

The three pocketed their gold, the generous Irishman having insisted on dividing it equally, which proved no little incumbrance as well as

fortune, and taking up their arms crossed over to the main-land.

By this time long fasting was beginning to tell upon their strength, and it was at once decided to procure something to appease their gnawing hunger.

A few minutes' hunting resulted in Flick shooting a fawn, a portion of which was at once roasted. After the meal had been dispatched, another slice of meat was cooked and stowed away in the young sportsmen's game-bags for future use.

Feeling much refreshed they now continued their journey through the hills, and ere long discovered an Indian trail.

The party at once set off to follow it, and pursued rapidly until it entered a deep, black defile, where the growth of heavy pines almost excluded the rays of the sun.

"Faith, and it's not the farst thime that mees hev been through here," said Flick; "and every time I could imagine thet mees felt the icy fingers av Old Nick upon me."

Scarcely had the last word left his lips, than a huge, dusky hand was thrust down from among the foliage of the low, drooping boughs under which he was passing—clutched him with its cold, bony fingers by the nape of the neck, and drew him from the ground, up among the dark boughs with the quickness of a flash.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRAGEDY IN THE FOREST GLADE.

LIKE a phantom the tall form of Solomon Strange glided through the forest after Black Bear.

Now and then the renegade would stop and gaze around him as though he felt a presentiment of lurking danger, and then again move on.

Half a mile from the Indian encampment was a little glade through which ran the trail the chief was following. As he neared the edge of it, the madman quickened his pace, and just as the renegade stepped into the moonlit space, a wild voice called out:

"Stop!"

The renegade involuntarily stopped and turned around.

At this moment the tall form of Solomon Strange sprang from the forest shadows, and dealt the chief a blow with his club that felled him lifeless at his feet.

Bending over the prostrate form, he scrutinized it.

"Yes, life is extinct," muttered he, and dropping upon his knees he began removing the bear's skin from his body. This done, a low, triumphant laugh escaped Solomon Strange's lips, and he lifted the lifeless form in his arms and carried it a short ways into the woods and hurled it down into a deep, black gorge.

Ten minutes later, a dark, hairy form appeared in the glade. It was the form of Solomon Strange disguised in the bear's skin.

No one could have told him from Blufe Brandon. Their movements were similar, and their size exactly the same.

"So far I have been successful," he murmured. "I stand in Black Bear's disguise; and now if I can only have the nerve and cunning to occupy his position among the red-skins for a few days, I will make these old hills stand agast with wonder and startling revelations. The Cheyenne tongue I can handle to a demonstration, and I believe I can imitate Black Bear's voice exactly."

"And then, there's Duval Dungarvon; but I can hoodwink him easy enough. Yes, to-morrow noon I will meet him at the Lone Pine, get a synopsis of the 'initiatory ceremony' into the order of road-agents and cut-throats. Ah, Solomon Strange! a desperate game is yours, and for what?—to solve a dark mystery, and rub out the stains of a dark crime that lays concealed behind it, but—"

His musings were here brought to an abrupt termination, by suddenly entering the opening in which stood the Indian encampment, while a few paces off sat an Indian sentinel.

"Will he challenge me?" the false chief mentally asked.

Then he knew that the sentinel would see that it was Black Bear's disguise, and allow him to pass. And so he did, with only a low, guttural exclamation at sight of the great chief.

As Strange entered the outskirts of the village, he saw that a large fire was burning in front of the council-lodge, and that a number of warriors were singing and dancing around it.

"I'll swow," muttered Strange, "I'm going to be drawn right into business the first thing. I'd rather k-apt a little to myself a day or so, until I got the exact run of things—Heavens!"

As if to favor his wish, at this moment a wild scream was heard overhead, and lifting his eyes, the mysterious Solomon Strange beheld the Aerial Demon floating over the village; so horrifying in its appearance that his blood seemed turned to ice.

Had a bomb-shell exploded in the midst of the exultant warriors that were dancing around the council-fire, they would not have scattered and fled in greater fear and terror.

The moment that the false Black Bear saw the young warriors flee with terror to their respective lodges, he hurried across the square and entered the lodge to the right of the council-house, which he knew to be the renegade's.

All was dark within this lodge, so Strange went and procured a torch from the deserted council-fire. With it, he rummaged the room, making himself acquainted with every thing, nook and corner within it.

He then extinguished the torch, threw himself upon a couch of skins in one corner, and curious to say, this mysterious madman, who after all was not a madman, fell asleep and slept soundly until morning.

He was awakened by the sound of voices without, and rising from his couch he peered out.

At this moment a light footstep was heard approaching. The skin hanging at the door of his lodge was raised, and a beautiful Indian woman entered, carrying upon a tray of woven rushes some slices of venison and roasted fish.

It was the wife of Allacotah, Silver Voice!

Solomon Strange started like a wild man at sight of the woman, but she failed to notice it.

"The chief of the Cheyennes must be hungry, since he had no supper," said Silver Voice, handing him the venison and fish.

Again Solomon Strange started—this time at sound of the woman's voice, though his disguise concealed his emotion. As he took the provision, however, Silver Voice caught sight of his eyes that glowed like burning coals of fire through the hairy mask, and caused a strange feeling to pervade her breast.

"Yes, Black Bear is quite hungry," Strange replied, watching to see if his voice attracted her notice.

It did. The woman started and turned to flee with sudden fear.

"You are not Blufe Brandon!" she exclaimed.

Solomon Strange seized her by the arm and prevented her escape. Then he stooped and whispered something in her ear. She would have involuntarily screamed, but Strange placed his claw-clad hand over her mouth and prevented her.

"Hush! for God's sake!" he exclaimed in an undertone, "do not expose me, but help me."

Here was more mystery. What could this strange, wild man be to Silver Voice? And what she to him? And why did he have the power to hold her spell-bound—speechless? Alas! why, and for what?

For fully ten minutes Silver Voice remained in the lodge with the false chief, in a low and earnest conversation. Then she went out and returned to her own lodge to the left of the council lodge.

Presently her husband, Allacotah, entered Black Bear's tent. He found the supposed great chief lying upon the couch of skins.

"Is the great Black Bear unwell?" asked the young chief.

"He is," returned Solomon Strange, hoarsely; "exposure to the night air is fast telling upon the Black Bear's lungs. It hurts him to speak. He is hoarse, but he wished to speak to the brave young chief, Allacotah."

"The ears of Allacotah are open," returned the young chief; "he hearkens to the voice of the great Black Bear."

"Since I am unable to take the war-path," began Solomon Strange, his hoarseness seeming to grow worse each moment, "I want the brave young Allacotah to take all my warriors and go away in the hills toward the rising sun and search for the white maiden. Should you find her, harm not a hair of her head, or the vengeance of the great Manitou will rest upon you. Should you find any pale-faces, harm them not, but bring them before Black Bear, even the great White Ranger whose sword has slain our braves in the heart of our encampment. Black Bear has spoken."

"Allacotah has heard, and will do his bidding with joy and pride," returned Allacotah, "but he is sorry the great chief is unwell, and can not lead his warriors upon the trail. But he must rest and he will be well soon. Allacotah has spoken."

The young chief turned and left the tent, and

in a few moments the wildest excitement prevailed throughout the village. Laughing to himself at his novel situation and splendid success, Solomon Strange peered out at a hole in his lodge, and saw that Allacotah was gathering his warriors for the war-path.

In less than an hour every warrior able to bear arms had left the village.

Black Bear, or Solomon Strange now arose and walked away through the encampment and plunged into the woods.

He was on his way to Lone Pine to meet Duval Dungarvon.

CHAPTER XV.

SILVIA'S PERILS.

SILVIA paddled the canoe, with the Cheyenne concealed under its projecting rim, under the falls; and having landed, she raised the sweep to let the waters close, then she took the lamp from where the ranger had left it in a niche, and wended her way back to her apartment, seated herself and burst into tears.

The discovery that she had made had sorely wounded her young, loving heart, and left her confused mind wrapped in blind mystery.

Purle, the panther, was crouched at her feet, and as her eyes sought the floor, the animal started up, his ears laid back like those of a maddened cat, his tail moving slowly from side to side, and his eyes glaring like coals of fire.

Silvia looked in the direction indicated by his burning gaze, and to her horror she beheld a Cheyenne Indian gazing in upon her from the door of the apartment.

Silvia uttered a low sob and fell unconscious to the floor with affright, the paper falling on the table by the lamp.

The savage, not seeing the panther, advanced into the room, but the next instant the beast leaped forward and dragged him to the floor.

A fierce struggle ensued. But it was as brief as decisive. The panther tore the savage almost into shreds.

A few minutes later a footstep sounded in the rocky hall. The next moment Rodger Rainbolt entered the room. As his eyes fell upon the mutilated form of the savage, the prostrate form of Silvia, the blood upon the panther's jaws, the paper upon the table by the lamp, he staggered under the sight.

Springing forward he raised Silvia tenderly in his arms and placed her upon the couch in the corner. He then turned to change the light in a better position, and as he did so the paper arrested his attention.

He glanced at the first word. A cry burst from his lips. His eyes became fixed upon the paper like one in a trance. He could not, he did not move them, until he had read the last word. Then he turned away, his whole frame trembling violently.

He removed the body of the savage; then, taking a vessel, hurried down to the falls to bring some cool water with which to bathe the brow of the maiden.

When he returned he was surprised to find her recovered, and sitting up on the bed, gazing about in a kind of bewilderment.

"Silvia, my darling!" exclaimed the ranger.

She looked around, her senses returning.

"Oh, Rodger!" she exclaimed, springing from the couch and snatching the paper; "but you must not see it."

"But I have seen it, Silvia."

"And read it?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Rodger! I promised never to breathe a word of it to you."

"Promised who?"

"Silver Voice, the Indian woman, the wife of Allacotah."

"You have kept your promise, Silvia. I saw the paper by accident."

"Then you know all, Rodger?"

"Yes, Silvia; but how came you to get the paper from the Indian woman, and where?"

Silvia told him all.

The ranger sighed painfully. He was silent for a moment, then said:

"But, Silvia, that paper is a falsehood. I will admit that I have been married to a woman that was an angel, but were she living I would not be here. No, no, Silvia! God knows I loved my wife—yes, adored her, worshiped her; but a cruel fate separated us; death took my darling wife, and in you, Silvia, I had hoped to find her equal."

"But you have no proof, Rodger, to prove to me that the statement in this paper is untrue—that your wife is dead."

"I can procure evidence, Silvia, in an hour—yes, in a moment, to prove to you that my wife is dead. But tell me, my dear Silvia, does the

handwriting of this note resemble any person's handwriting that you know?" and he handed her the note.

Silvia took the paper and examined the writing closely. A shade of sadness came over her face, as she replied:

"Yes, Rodger, it resembles my poor sister Florence's writing a great deal, though she was a better writer."

"Then you have a sister?"

"I had, but poor Florence is dead now."

"Are you certain that she is dead?" the ranger asked.

"Why, Rodger, you are getting excited!" she replied, with much surprise at the ranger's question. "Of course, I would not tell you a falsehood about my sister being dead, since it is nothing to you."

"But it is something to me, Silvia—it is something to me; but let us drop the question before it gets to be painful. I must go and search for your father and that Indian woman who gave you the paper. Have you any fears to remain here alone?"

"None at all, since I have such a noble companion and protector as Purle, the panther."

"Then I will take my departure, entertaining hopes that the mystery that enshrouds us will be cleared away, and that I may yet insist for an answer to the question of my love for you," said the ranger, and as he concluded he turned and left the maiden alone.

When his footsteps had died away in the distant hall, Silvia threw herself upon her couch, and wept bitterly.

CHAPTER XVI.

DUVAL DUNGARVON AND BLACK BEAR AT THE LONE PINE.

THE sun had just crossed the meridian, on the day set for the meeting of Duval Dungarvon and Black Bear at the Lone Pine, when Solomon Strange, in Black Bear's disguise, emerged from the forest on the south side of the glade, and stopped beneath the Lone Pine.

He had not been there more than an hour, when Duval Dungarvon emerged from the forest on the north side of the glade and advanced toward him.

"Here we are ag'in," exclaimed Solomon Strange, quite hoarse.

"Yes," replied the robber-captain, looking at him in a way that made Strange flinch with uneasiness; "but what's the matter, Brandon, you talk so hoarse?"

"Matter enuff," returned the false Black Bear. "I caught a devil of a cold last night at the Devil's Tarn. But come; let's to business."

"Now, if I tell you, Brandon, you must never breathe it to a living soul, for it is in strict violation of our laws to do so."

"You needn't be afraid of me tellin', Dungarvon. Go on with your story."

The robber-captain began, and in a few moments he had related the whole of their proceedings in initiating a man into their band of Mountain Men, or robbers, and concluded by saying:

"Suppose you go in to night?"

"Can just as well as not," replied Strange, "though there is one thing I had forgotten to mention."

"Well, let's have it."

"I shall insist on keeping my bearskin on at the ranch."

"Of course! We wouldn't know that the great Black Bear was among us unless you wore it," returned Dungarvon.

"Then I am ready to go with you," said the false chief.

The two arose, and at once set off toward the robber's ranch.

As they walked along, conversing on different topics, Strange finally said:

"You have never told me, Dungarvon, why it is that you hate this man Sanford so bitterly."

"No. I tell very few, because I don't want everybody to know, for then it would be no secret, and that's the beauty of it."

"Yes; but tell it, tell it to me, Dungarvon," said Strange.

"Well, to make a short story out of a long one, Sanford and I both loved the same woman, a creole of New Orleans. She would have married me, but Sanford, curse him! told her I was the son of an Italian brigand, and so won her. In the course of time they had two children, Florence and Silvia. Wayland Sanford went to California during the gold-fever, and I followed, waiting for a chance to take his life. After a time the chance came. Sanford quarreled with a miner, and publicly threatened his life. That

night the miner was killed. Of course I did it, but I was detected in the act by one of Sanford's friends. I threw the man down the shaft and left him there. Sanford was arrested for the crime, but escaped, and flew no one knew where. I followed, but failed to find my man.

"I left California, and, seeing that money could be made, organized the band I now command, and we have been operating the route ever since."

"Some time after I began, a regiment of troops came into the region, and fearing they were after me, I went in disguise to the camp, and sought an interview with the colonel. You can imagine my surprise when I found myself face to face with Wayland Sanford, colonel commanding the regiment!"

"He knew me, and, fearful that I would blow on him, asked the price of my silence."

"I knew Inez was dead, so I demanded the daughter, Florence, for my wife. He stormed and swore; offered ten thousand dollars, but I laughed at him, and to end the matter, he finally gave in and wrote to his daughter that he had made an engagement for her hand with a particular friend. The girl declined the honor, and answered that she was engaged to an officer in his regiment, one Captain Warren Walraven."

"I told Sanford I could fix him, and so I sat down and wrote a letter, forged the handwriting from Walraven to Bluffe Brandon, chief of the Cheyennes, in which he offered to sell the command into his power. This I dropped where one of Sanford's scouts found it and gave it to the colonel."

"Walraven was court-martialed and dismissed the service. The next day he, with his nigger servant, Ebony Jim, started for Laramie, where Florence was. I captured him on his way—the nigger escaped—and taking him to Devil's Tarn, I put him in a canoe and started him adrift over the falls. That ended him."

"Sanford wrote to his daughter, telling her all about Walraven, how he was cashiered and killed by the Indians, but she had suddenly disappeared from the fort, and was seen no more. Her skeleton, however, was found in an old well near the fort a year or so afterward. About a year after that I entrapped a traveler, who proved to be the very man, Barker, whom I had thrown down the shaft!"

"And you hold him a prisoner yet?" asked Black Bear.

"You bet, though he can't last a week longer. A few weeks since I heard Sanford was at Omaha, and you know the rest. But here we are at the ranch."

They stood at the mouth of the cavern where-in Willis and Ralph had been captured. A sentinel was posted at the entrance, who demanded the password from Dungarvon before he was allowed to pass with the supposed Black Bear, it being so dark by this time that the sentinel could not distinguish the features of the captain.

Passing along the narrow cavern a short ways, the captain stopped and placed his hand in a small niche in the rocky wall. Immediately the wall seemed to part with a heavy, grating noise.

"This way, Brandon," said the robber chief, and the two stepped through the aperture in the wall into a small but brilliantly-lighted chamber. Then the captain touched a small, projecting rock on the wall, when the two walls rolled together again, and there was no sign of the aperture through which they had passed.

"This," said Dungarvon, turning to his companion, "is my private apartment, and you may now consider yourself, Black Bear, in the Lodge of Mountain Men, from which you will never go alive until you have been initiated into the brotherhood."

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ADVENTURE IN THE DARK.

EBONY JIM had not remained in his concealment among the foliage more than a minute when he recognized the voice of his old friend, Flick O'Flynn, among the three whom he at first took for robbers, but who in fact were O'Flynn, Frank Armond and Walter Lyman.

Ebony was in the act of springing to the ground and making his presence known, when the Irishman's remark—which caught the negro's ears—of the place through which they were passing being so gloomy, and that he imagined he felt the icy fingers of the Old Nick upon him, suggested a practical joke to his mind. Waiting until the trio were directly under him, he thrust his hand down through the foliage, and seizing the loquacious O'Flynn by the neck, jerked him from the ground and up among the foliage with the quickness of thought.

Flick gave vent to a furious yell, and dropping his rifle drew his knife, supposing that he was in the hands of the Old Boy, sure enough. But what was his surprise, when, on turning to deal a deadly blow, he saw Ebony seated before him, his sable face convulsed with laughter.

"Faith, and mees hev a notion to give yees a dig wath this knife, so I hev; but niver mind, there's a reckoning coming, so there is."

But how had it fared with Frank and Walter?

They saw the negro's hand thrust down, saw Flick lifted from the ground, heard his frightful scream, and, without a second look or thought, took to their heels and fled with all possible speed over the hill.

But, unfortunately, they ran right from safety into danger.

They had not gone more than a mile when they discovered a party of mounted Cheyennes charging directly toward them.

Instantly Frank's rifle was to his face, and he shot, in quick succession, two of the leading savages. He was quickly surrounded by the whole party, which gave Walter an opportunity to escape, which he did.

Frank was tied upon one of the ponies, and immediately the Indians, a score in all, mounted their animals and set off toward the north, moving in regular Indian file, one after the other, Frank being next to the foremost one, who led his—the captive's—pony. They seemed in no hurry, moving along quite leisurely. However, they failed to discover two figures that were stealing after them like shadows.

Slowly the day wore away. Night came on. Frank strained his eyes in hopes of catching a glimpse of some friendly form moving through the gloom. Suddenly he heard a slight noise before him. He fixed his eyes on the gloom in advance. Just then the animal of the preceding and foremost captor flitted across a patch of moonlight struggling feebly down through the opening in the tree-tops.

The captive started with wonder and surprise.

The animal was riderless!

Not one of the savages behind had discovered the sudden, silent and mysterious disappearance of their leader.

Again the preceding animal crossed a patch of moonlight, and still greater was his surprise, when he recognized by a kind of phosphorescent gleam, the form of *Flick O'Flynn seated upon its back!*

Then the truth flashed upon his mind. Flick, the brave and noble hunter, had escaped, followed his, Frank's, captors, and with the silence of death had dragged the savage from his pony, dispatched him and mounted the animal himself.

"What does the man mean?" mused Frank; "what next will he do—Oh!"

The exclamation involuntarily escaped his lips, but it was drowned in the noise of the animals' feet. In passing under some low, drooping boughs where the gloom was impenetrable to the human eye, Frank felt a heavy form drop from the limbs overhead *behind him on the animal he was riding*, and the captive felt that his hands were being cut.

"For heaven's sake don't breathe! it's dis black nigger."

Frank recognized the voice as that of Ebony Jim, and he at once realized the situation of affairs.

"Dar, take dat," whispered the darky, placing a knife in Frank's hand, "and loosen your feet."

Frank leaned over and cut the thongs. So far he was free. A moment later there were heard the hasty footfalls of hurrying feet.

The escape was not discovered for some moments, and then a hurried but vain search was commenced by the Indians. Frank was saved by as bold, silent and daring a stratagem as was ever conceived by the fearless borderman.

Fortunately, Frank's rifle, accouterments and coat were restored to him, they having been in possession of the unfortunate chief, whom the two hunters dragged from his pony unseen. The rest of his things, including his share of the robbers' gold, were lost.

Matters being explained all around, the three set off through the forest in hopes of finding Walter.

They had not traveled far, when they discovered that they were being followed, while in every direction they could hear the hooting of owls, the cry of the night-hawk, and the sharp barking of the wolf.

To Frank these sounds seemed natural enough, but to the two hunters they did not, for they

knew that they were the signals of the Indians.

"Ay, now!" exclaimed O'Flynn, "and it's a devil av a time wees are going to have. The whole Cheyenne nation is in these hills, so they are."

"S'pose we strike fur de Bear's Cave," said Ebony Jim.

"Aghrade," responded the Irishman, and so they shaped their course accordingly.

In a few minutes the cavern in question was reached, and taking the lead, Ebony Jim led the way into the black subterranean passage.

They had not gone more than fifty feet when a glowing fire, in a chamber to their right, burst suddenly upon their eyes; and within the light of the fire, they saw three men seated, engaged in conversation.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN THE ROBBER'S RANCH.

SOLOMON STRANGE felt a cold chill creep over him as he seated himself in the robber captain's private apartment, which was furnished with all the elegance that heart could wish and gold procure. An oil lamp was burning on a chintz-covered stand, lighting up the room.

"You've a cosey lair here, Dungarvon," said Strange, gazing around, with apparent admiration.

"Yes, one into which I defy the lightning's bolt to enter," returned the captain, as he crossed the room, and took from an alcove in the wall a bottle of brandy and a couple of silver goblets, which he placed upon the table. "But come, Black Bear, wheel your chair up to the table, and let's drink to our success."

Strange could not deny the robber chief's request, for he was then an honored guest in his house, so he moved his chair to the table and filled the goblets with the brandy. Then with one hand he parted the hairy mask from his lips, and with the other he lifted the goblet, and with a "Here's to you, captain," dashed off the fiery liquid at a draught.

After several glasses had been drank, Dungarvon seized a rope communicating with some other room and jerked it violently. Strange heard the faint tinkle of a bell, and a moment after, the wall on the side opposite from that through which they had entered, rolled apart, and a slim, pale youth of some twenty years entered.

"Roderick," said the captain, addressing the youth, "bring me and the great chief, Black Bear, some supper at once."

The youth turned and left the room, the walls closing after him.

"That's our cook," said the chief robber.

Presently Roderick returned with a well-prepared lunch, which the robber captain and his guest ate with a keen appetite.

After the meal had been dispatched, Dungarvon said:

"Now we are ready for business, Brandon: but excuse me for a moment," and he passed out through the opening through which Roderick had come and gone.

"Well, that beats me," muttered Strange, when he found himself alone; "the idea of these rocky walls parting at the touch of their inmates. Wonder if they will part at my touch?" and rising, he advanced to the wall through which they had entered the room, and touched the little projecting rock that he had seen Duval touch when they entered, expecting to see the walls roll back. But he was disappointed; they remained immovable as the rock of ages, and after several fruitless efforts to possess himself of the secret, he took his seat.

A few minutes later Dungarvon entered the room, followed by a score of his men, rough, burly-looking fellows, whose waists were girded with knives and pistols.

Dungarvon introduced his men to the supposed Black Bear, then said:

"Well, Brandon, we're ready."

"And so am I," returned Strange.

"Then advance through that opening into the adjoining chamber nine paces and stop," said the chief.

Strange advanced into the chamber, which was black as Hades, and which, from the hollow, sepulchral echo of his footfalls, he knew was large and capacious. Had it been the real Bluffe Brandon, his cowardly heart would have shrunk with terror, knowing what was coming.

Through the dark nine paces, Solomon Strange groped his way, then stopped. At that instant the room was suddenly lit up by a glowing light from behind. And, horrors!

He stood on one side of a long table, while facing him on the other side, sat, bolt upright, in arm-chairs, with black cloaks thrown over

their shoulders, a dozen human skeletons glaring at him in a ghastly, horrifying manner. Each one clutched in his bony hand, which protruded from under the cloak, a small, glittering dagger. On the table in front of each one sat a small glass goblet filled with some red liquid resembling blood. Not a living soul was to be seen in the room.

Although the mysterious Solomon Strange had expected to see the same, as Dungarvon had told him, he felt an inward shudder of horror and disgust, and had he not been playing a desperate and secret game, he would have turned away and cursed the robbers for their fiendishness in thus tampering with the remains of the dead. But such an act would have exposed him, and he resolved to go on with the play he had successfully begun.

The instant the light had flashed upon the ghastly figures before him, the one in the center arose to a standing posture, as though possessed of life. The grinning mouth was opened, and then these words seemed to fall from his lips, hollow and sepulchral.

"Bluffe Brandon, are you aware of what you have done? do you know that you have entered the brotherhood of Mountain Men? If you do, beware!" and the figure raised its bony hand in which it clutched the glittering dagger as if to strike, then it fell at its side again. Then each of the other ghastly figures raised their glittering daggers, and as they dropped again, they seemed to repeat, in one voice:

"Beware!"

The standing figure then went on:

"Look at these glasses, Bluffe Brandon; they contain the blood of those who once were Mountain Men—the blood of those who stand before you, those who were once as you now are: but we were traitors; we essayed to betray our brothers into the hands of the Government detectives; but, ah! the vengeance of the brotherhood fell upon us, and sapped our life-blood out, and left us what you see us—a *ghastly warning to others!* And now again I say, beware!"

"Beware!" chattered the other figures.

At this instant the room was wrapped in blinding darkness. Then Strange distinguished the light footfalls of hurrying feet. He heard the robbers removing the ghastly figures, and the ventriloquist that had put the words of life in their mouths, scrambling from under the table, where he had been concealed with others of the robbers, who, with wire connections, had raised the arms of the skeletons.

Presently all became silent, then the light flashed through the chamber again, and in the chairs where the skeletons had sat, Solomon Strange saw a number of robbers seated, while, where the figure stood, Duval Dungarvon was standing.

Instead of daggers, the robbers held in their hands the goblets of (not blood) red, sparkling wine, which as they lifted to their lips, Dungarvon said:

"Here's to Black Bear, the great Cheyenne chief, our new and distinguished member of the brotherhood of Mountain Men," and as he concluded, they placed the goblets to their lips and drank.

And thus ended the ceremony, which, to the reader, may be horrifying and even disgusting, nevertheless it is a positive fact that such a custom did exist among the mountain robbers.

"Now, come, Black Bear," said Dungarvon, taking that supposed worthy by the skin-clad arm, "and I will show you through our ranch, and the secrets connected with it."

The two crossed the wide chamber, which Dungarvon had designated the "Cloister of the Ghouls," and entered a smaller apartment that was brilliantly lighted. In this room was a carpenter's work-bench and tools of all kinds.

"This," said Dungarvon, "is the mechanical department. We often find it necessary to our success to use a carpenter to make c. files and other things. But let us go on."

They passed into another apartment.

"This is our carpenter's room and paint, for making counterforts, 'greenbacks' and 'gold coins.' Now I will show you how we make our doors open and close," he said, leading Solomon Strange, who was drinking in every word with the deepest interest, back to his own apartment.

"You see this small projection; by *pushing* on it when the door is open, it will close; and by *pulling* upon it, it will open the door, thus," and the robber-chief illustrated the matter, by causing the wall to roll apart and then shut again. "Now, the whole thing is worked by hidden springs, how exactly, no one ever knew, but the inventor, who was three years in con-

structing the doors in this cavern. First, however, immense grooves were chiseled in the floor and ceiling, and in them, these great rocks move on invisible rollers. All the machinery that works it is concealed in an artificial cavity back in the permanent walls. Now see, Brandon, if you can open and shut the door."

The supposed Brandon seized hold of the projection, and pulled toward him. A thrill of joy passed through his frame, as the heavy walls rolled apart. Then he pressed upon the projection, and they closed again.

"Now I have one more apartment to show you, Blufe, and that's what we call the 'Dead Fall,' where old Barker and the two Omaha 'larks' are consigned."

Procuring a lantern, the robber-captain and his friend passed out into the main entrance. This they followed some distance until they came to where a wall, crossing the passage at right angles, disputed their further entrance.

"This," said Dungarvon, tapping the wall before them, "is the door to the 'Dead Fall.' See here. By pressing a spring in this niche, the door is unlocked, and by pressing another in this niche, the door rolls back into a cavity in the wall and the passage is continued. No one not acquainted with the cavern would ever know but what the passage terminates here. Shall we enter the Dead Fall?"

"Certainly," returned Strange; "by all means, I should like to see the man that was thrown into a fifty-foot shaft and climbed out alive."

The robber-captain opened the door and they advanced into the great chamber, wherein Willis and Ralph had been entrapped, and where they were now imprisoned with Barker.

Closing the door after them, they advanced to where the prisoners lay upon a couch of old skins. They all arose to a sitting posture when they heard the two men entering.

Willis and Ralph looked sad and dejected, but Barker! God of mercy! he resembled a skeleton more than a human. He was wasted away to a mere shadow, while long beard and hair of snowy whiteness hung down upon his breast and shoulders. His hands were like the claws of an eagle, and great, pitiful eyes stared at the robber-chief with a wild expression.

"Well, my larks, how are you getting along?" asked Dungarvon, with a demoniac leer.

"Oh, God! we are dying by inches," returned Barker.

The robber-captain laughed mockingly, while Solomon Strange turned away with tears of pity in his eyes.

In a moment more the robber-chief and his companion left the Dead Fall. When they had got back into the captain's room, a fresh bottle of brandy was brought out and placed upon the table.

Drawing the cork, the robber chief passed the bottle over to Strange, saying:

"Here, Brandon, take the golden nectar right from Black Betty's lips—no use foolin' with goblets."

Strange took up the bottle, and while the captain's eyes were turned, he managed to pour half the contents on the floor under pretense of drinking, then passed the bottle back to Dungarvon.

The captain took it, and holding it up between his eyes and the light, exclaimed with a drunken leer:

"By Jove, Brandon, you have got a lip for glory, and now I'll show you that I can swamp the other half," and so saying, he turned the bottle to his lips and emptied it.

Strange chuckled to himself, as the captain staggered to a chair, saying:

"Spose you're going to stay all night with me, Brandon, are you (hic) not? My men are all in bed long (hic) ago."

"Well, I reckon, as we're having a good time, I will stay."

"That's it, Blufe, you're (hic) a jolly dog of a boy. Just lock in the alcove (hic) and get another 'Black Betty.' But before the bottle could be brought, the robber rolled upon the floor like a dead man.

"Thank God! my time has come," muttered Strange to himself. And taking up the robber's lantern he lit it. In one corner of the room stood a number of rifles with powder-horns and shot-pouches hung upon them. Strange selected three of the finest-looking one of which proved to be Willis Armond's repeating rifle, and taking them in his arms he opened the outlet in the wall and passed out into the main entrance. He then leaned the rifles against the wall, and turning moved toward the Dead Fall.

In a moment he had reached the door, and pressing the two springs it rolled back into the wall. He entered the room and stood before the prisoners.

"Barker, Armond, Rodman, come," he said, speaking hastily, "come, if you wish to escape!"

"And, in the name of God, who are you that speaks thus," gasped Willis, staring up at the sound of the man's voice; "are you a beast, or are you a human in disguise?"

"I'm a friend. Let that suffice. Come, I say, come."

Strange led the way and the three prisoners arose and followed him, though the young men were compelled to assist Barker.

In a moment they came to where Strange had left the guns.

"Here are rifles and ammunition," he said, handing each of them a weapon, "and here is my hunting-knife. Now wait here a moment."

He opened the walls and passed into Dungarvon's room, and returned in a moment with a bottle of brandy.

"Here, boys, take this. It will strengthen you," he said. "At the door or mouth of the cavern is a sentinel. Should he demand a password, say to him, 'Go den.' Should he recognize you in the dark, knock him down and fly. One word more. Barker, do you know where the Devil's Tarn is?"

"Yes," returned Barker.

"Meet me there to-morrow evening. Don't fail. Go."

The prisoners moved along the dark passage, wondering who their strange deliverer could be. At the mouth of the cavern they found the wary sentinel sound asleep, and passing him, they plunged out into the free air of heaven.

Strange waited until they had had time to make their escape, then he turned and moved back to the door of the Dead Fall. He saw that it was fastened, then he placed his finger into the niche and tore out the spring that unlocked it. His work for the night was accomplished. The door to the Dead Fall could never be opened until it was battered down with sledges, and consequently, the robbers would never know but that the prisoners were still in there.

Softly Solomon Strange stole back into the robber-captain's room, and having put out the lantern, he stretched himself upon the carpeted floor and soon fell asleep.

When he awoke it was daylight, though no ray of sunshine ever shone in the cavern. Lamps furnished the only light there. Dungarvon had slept off the effect of his night's carouse, and, when his guest awoke he found him seated by the table reading a paper that one of his spies had brought in from Cheyenne City during the night.

Breakfast was brought in to the captain, and his guest, the other robbers dining in the Cloister of the Ghoul.

After their morning repast was over, the false Black Bear took his departure for the Indian encampment, having expressed a hope that when he came back to the ranch he would have Silvia Sanford to hand over to the robber captain.

Briskly through the forest and over the stony hills went the mysterious Solomon Strange.

Keeping to the right of the Indian encampment he struck the little glade wherein, but two nights ago, he had slain the renegade chief, Blufe Brandon, and entered a small cavern near at hand.

Ten minutes passed by, then he appeared again. But he was not in the disguise of the Black Bear. He wore his own ragged garments and carried his heavy, knotted club. For a moment he stood and gazed around him, then he strode away toward the west, his long yellow hair and whiskers streaming in the wind.

He had not gone far when his ears caught the sound of clattering hoofs. He looked down the path before him and saw Rodger Rainbolt, the ranger, coming toward him.

Stopping, he placed one foot in advance of the other, seized his club in both hands, and swinging it aloft, cried out:

"Stop! stop! stop, my lord, or I'll beat you, beat you down!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A CHIEF'S DEATH.

It required but a single glance for Frank Armond to recognize two of the three men seated around the glowing fire in the cavern, called by the two hunters Bear's Cave. They were Ralph Rodman and his brother Willis. The third person, the reader will readily guess, was Gustave Barker.

A shout of joy escaped Frank's lips when he saw his friend and brother were safe.

In a moment they were grouped around the fire, greeting each other as though they had been separated for years.

"But where is Walter?" asked Willis.

"The good Lord only knows," responded Frank; "he became separated from me to-day while being pursued by a band of Indians. I hope, however, he is safe."

"And now, jis' tell dis chile how ye 'cape from de robbers' den," said Ebony.

"Well, we escaped to-night, by the assistance of a man disguised in a bear's skin, and whom the robber-captain called Black Bear," returned Willis; then turning to Barker, he continued: "This Mr. Barker escaped with us. He had been a prisoner there for three years. He knew uncle Wayland Sanford, Frank, years ago in California."

"I am happy to meet the friend of my dear old uncle," said Frank, grasping the thin, cold hand of Barker, "but of course, Willis has told you of uncle Wayland's sudden and mysterious death."

"Yes, my young friend, and I would have given my life to have seen your uncle before his death," returned Barker.

"You must have cherished a great affection for him, Mr. Barker."

"Not only that, young man, but I hold a secret that would have prolonged his life twenty years."

Barker began and related the story of Wayland Sanford being convicted of murder at Miner's Gulch on the Yuba, through the instrumentality of Duval Dungarvon, as the reader has already heard it from the lips of Dungarvon himself. Then he told how he had lain bleeding and mangled in the shaft for five days before he was taken out, more dead than alive, to find both Sanford and Dungarvon gone. Then he told how he had labored in the mines, accumulated a large fortune, started to his home in the East, was robbed of his gold in the mountains, and left for dead a second time; how he recovered and hid away in the mountains, where for years he remained a hunter, and finally fell into the hands of his would-be murderer, Duval Dungarvon, and that he had never heard of Wayland Sanford until he met Willis in prison.

"Then you are acquainted with these Black Hills?" said Frank, when Barker had finished his story.

"Yes, I know every hill, hollow, and stream, and about two months before my incarceration in the robbers' den, I had met and become acquainted with a young ranger in whom I took a deep interest, and whom I would love to see."

"Did you make him a present of something once?" asked Frank, as a thought occurred to his mind.

"Yes; a trained, pet eagle. Have you met Rodger Rainbolt?"

"Yes; it was he who dealt—" began Frank but at this juncture Flick O'Flynn appeared from the entrance and interrupted him, saying:

"Ay, b'ys, and it's a devil av a time we're going to have. The red devils have found out our hiding-spot, and th'ye're swarming like hornets around us on the outside. Musha! it's fite 'r starve, so bring yer tools, b'ys, and come to the front."

"Isn't this cavern called Bear's Cave?" suddenly asked Barker, as they started to their feet in alarm.

"Indeed it is," responded O'Flynn.

"Great Heavens!" exclaimed Barker, "I had for gotten the place. Do you know that there are two entrances to it?"

"Holy Mother, no!" responded Flick.

Footsteps sounded in the passage behind them. They glanced back. A cry of horror escaped each lip, for with a flaming torch in one hand, and a tomahawk in the other, they beheld a score of savages, led by the young chief Allacotah, advancing toward them.

Quick as thought Frank and Willis raised their repeating rifles and fired. Allacotah fell dead, with a bullet through his heart. Again and again the young men fired until every chamber of their rifles was empty. A savage fell at every shot. The others recoiled, then when the war-whoop of another party coming in at the entrance rolled through the cavern, they rallied and closed in upon their friends. The conflict was short. Our friends were all, save one, overpowered and made prisoners. Gustave Barker, like the phantom that he seemed, had glided from the cavern and made his escape in the woods.

And now a wail of lamentation echoed through the cavern, as the savages gathered around the lifeless form of their young chief Allacotah. Victory had been dearly bought by them. Besides their chief, a dozen of the best warriors lay dead, while not one of their enemies had fallen. Though it would have been an easy matter to have tomahawked the captives, they dare not, for the great chief, Black Bear, had ordered that all captives be taken and brought to the village alive and unharmed.

Litters were constructed of blankets, and the dead and wounded placed upon them to be taken back to the village.

The prisoners' feet were unbound and they permitted to stand; and then with their hands bound at their backs, they were marched out the cavern.

The first glimmer of approaching day was beginning to streak the eastern sky.

In a few minutes the dead had been brought from the cavern, and then the party fled away through the forest in the direction of the Indian village.

CHAPTER XX.

RAINBOLT MEETS WITH AN ACCIDENT.

RAINBOLT halted before the mysterious Solomon Strange, a smile resting upon his features, a feeling of strange curiosity upon his mind.

"Hol' ho!" laughed Strange, "so we have met again, my Lord Oliver—I mean Thunderbolt."

"So it seems, though you were the last person I had expected to meet, Mr. Strange," replied the ranger.

"And why so—why so, my lord?"

"I supposed you were on the Pacific coast with old Neptune."

"So I have been, my lord, and a right merry time had old Nep and I."

"I should have thought you would have remained there, Mr. Strange, with your old friend of the sea," said Rainbolt, scarcely knowing what to make of the wild, strange man.

"I would have remained, my lord, but in making my passage over these hills when I saw you before, I heard a dark secret connected with them, and that an awful demon rode on the midnight air over the mountain, striking terror to every heart, every heart, my lord."

"And who told you so much, Mr. Strange?"

"The wind, the wind, my lord. And the secret I'll fathom and the demon I'll slay. And now, is there aught of the past or future you would wish me to know, my lord?"

"There is much I would like to know, Mr. Strange," replied the ranger, "but I can scarcely remember any thing, now."

"You doubt me, my lord, but hearken: *Your wife lives*, my lord, and seek you not another! Ay, you start, but it is so. And let me tell you more, my lord. Since God in his mercy saved you from death at the falls, you need have no fear of your fellow-men. Your shoulders bear the weight of no crime; you were the victim of a foul plot—the letter was forged by one Duval Dunganvon in hopes of having you hung, hung, my lord."

As the strange man concluded, he turned and strode briskly away, leaving the ranger seated alone upon his animal, completely dumfounded and mystified.

"Who is he? Who is he?" muttered the ranger to himself; "he is a queer, strange creature, one that knows all about my past, and can even read my thoughts. Heavens! what if it is—no, it can't be, but I will overtake him and make further inquiries."

Rainbolt spoke to his animal and dashed away in pursuit of Solomon Strange, but he had gone but a short distance, when a lithe figure glided suddenly across his path, frightened his animal, causing it to rear and plunge wildly and throw its rider to the ground, and unfortunately, in the fall, the ranger's head struck upon a sharp rock, completely stunning him.

As the unfortunate man lay thus unconscious, the figure that had frightened his animal glided from the undergrowth and bent over his prostrate form. It was the Indian woman, Silver Voice.

As she gazed down into the ranger's face, a low, convulsive sob burst from her lips, and then she stooped and kissed his pale lips.

"Oh, my God!" she sobbed, "have I killed him? Oh, Warren, my love, my darling! Let me hear you say that you forgive. I did not intend to scare your boy. Oh, Warren! Warren! my wronged and forsaken husband, are you dead at last? But perhaps 't is better that you never lived to die with shame for her you loved."

"Florence."

Silver Voice started up. It was the ranger's lips that articulated the name. The voice of the woman seemed to recall him back to consciousness. He opened his eyes, gazed around him and up into the face of the woman bending over him. He recognized the face beneath its dusky paint, and springing up like one delirious, he clasped the form of the woman in his arms and pressed her to his breast.

"Florence, my wife," he cried, "have I found you, whom the world thinks dead?"

She tried to free herself from his embrace, saying:

"Yes, you have found me, Warren, but in disgrace and disguise."

"Oh, God! Florence, my darling wife, what do you mean?"

"I mean that I am no longer worthy of your love. It will only wound your heart deeper to tell you. Go, and forget me," and she turned to leave, but the ranger detained her.

"Stay, Florence, do not leave me. You are mine. Mine to love, and mine to cherish. Why do you turn from me?"

"Because I am no longer worthy of your love, but God knows I supposed you dead."

"Florence, my wife, I can guess your secret. You are the wife of an Indian."

"Oh, God! it is too true, Warren; for two years I have been the wife of Allacotah—a noble and kind young chief, in whose veins courses Anglo-Saxon blood by nature, if not by birth."

The ranger groaned aloud, as though his heart was bursting.

"Then you love your Indian husband, Florence?" he asked.

"No, I only admired him for his kindness and noble principles, such as no other Indian ever possessed. I became his wife only for protection from the insults of his people and the power of my people. But I supposed you dead, Warren. Your servant told me he had seen you dashed to pieces over the Devil's Tarn. Never, until the night you rescued Silvia from Black Bear, did I know you lived. And now you know my secret, my disgrace, Warren, so let me go."

"No, Florence, you are mine. What you have done makes me love you all the stronger. It is no disgrace; it is only what a strong, brave and sensible woman would and should have done under such trying circumstances."

"But, Warren, you love another—you love my sister, Silvia."

"Only because she is your sister. God knows I never could love another as I do you, my angel, Florence."

Before Silver Voice could reply, Echo, the eagle,

darted down through the forest with his warning cry of danger.

Turning quickly around, the ranger and his wife—for such she was, dear reader—saw a number of savages coming directly toward them.

"Oh, Warren," the woman cried, "they are savages! fly for your life! They hate you—they will kill you!"

"Life is nothing more to me, Florence, without you," replied the ranger, calmly.

"Then fly, Warren, for my sake!"

The ranger stooped and kissed the sweet, pleading lips of his wife, and with a feeling of joy that had long been a stranger to his heart, he turned, and catching his animal that was grazing near, sprung into the saddle and dashed sharply away.

He at once shaped his course for his cavern home, which he reached after two hours' brisk riding.

On entering Silvia's apartment, what was his surprise to find a young man seated therein with her! As he entered, Silvia and the stranger rose to their feet, when the maiden said:

"My friend, Mr. Walter Lyman, Mr. Rainbolt."

CHAPTER XXI.

STARTLING NEWS.

The ranger grasped young Lyman by the hand, and gazing into his eyes reflectively, said:

"I am sure we have met before, Mr. Lyman."

"Yes, sir; on the night you rescued Colonel Wayland Sanford and his party from the Indians," returned Lyman.

"Yes, yes, I remember you now; but where are the rest of your party?"

"I know where none of them are but Colonel Sanford. Yesterday I became separated from my friends, and in wandering by the falls to-day I met Miss Sanford, who invited me into your hidden home."

"You are a thousand times welcome, Mr. Lyman. But you said you knew where Mr. Sanford was, I believe."

"Yes, sir; he is dead," the young man returned, seriously.

"Dead!" exclaimed the ranger, starting up and glancing at Silvia, who was weeping tears of sorrow. "Wayland Sanford dead?"

"Yes; he fell dead with the heart disease a few moments after you left that night. He was buried in the glade where he died."

The ranger dropped into a chair. A silence that was broken only by Silvia's sobs fell upon the place. Young Lyman watched the ranger's face with deep interest, and saw that he was terribly agitated.

Presently Silvia raised her head from the table and asked:

"Mr. Rainbolt, what was written upon that paper which you gave father the night you met him?"

The ranger was much surprised by the question, but replied:

"I wrote that Rodger Rainbolt and Warren Walraven were one and the same person."

"Then your name is not Rodger Rainbolt?" asked Silvia.

"No; my name is Warren Walraven."

"And did you know my father? and did he know you?"

"Yes. Why shouldn't he, when his daughter Florence, your sister, Silvia, is my wife?"

"Rodger, you are jesting!" Silvia exclaimed.

"I am not, Silvia. I have long thought I would tell you this."

"But we never knew that Florence was married before she died, or drowned herself."

"No, Silvia, we were married secretly. You were in Omaha at the time, so I never saw you until the night I rescued you from Black Bear," said the ranger. "And let me tell you something else that will surprise you. Florence is not dead."

"Rodger!" Silvia gasped, "is that true?"

"It is, Silvia. The woman in Indian disguise known as Silver Voice is Florence."

"Rodger, it is impossible! Silver Voice is the wife of an Indian chief."

"Yes, Silvia; but for all that she is Florence," said the ranger; and he went on and related the cause of Florence's flight to the Indian country and her marriage to Allacotah, as Florence had related it to him.

"Then Florence did not commit a willful wrong in marrying the chief. But why did you not make your existence known to her before she fled?"

In reply to this the ranger related the story of his trials and sufferings, of which the reader is already aware.

He stated that when he went over the falls in a canoe the little craft alighted upon its end in such a way as not to injure him severely, and that, by some chance, it was thrown backward under the falls instead of outward. Here he discovered the cavern that he had made his home.

"And where is Florence now?" asked Silvia.

"I left her in the forest, near the Indian encampment. She begged me to fly, to escape a band of Indians we saw approaching. I did so; but since you have company, and it is some time until night, I will go in search of her."

"Oh, do, Rodger! and bring her here!" cried Silvia.

The ranger turned to leave the room, saying:

"I will go and try, but I fear I can never induce her to leave the Indians."

Before Silvia could reply he was gone.

CHAPTER XXII.

A STRANGE INTERVIEW.

It is a night of fearful storm, but one that has been full of events to the captives. Taken to the Indian village, they were doomed to the stake; but

the counterfeit Black Bear coming in with Florence, had learned all—the assault on the cave, the death of Allacotah, which freed the unhappy wife from a bond that must have broken her heart—and by co-operating with Rainbolt, whom Florence brought to the guidance of the released captives, the brave Solomon Strange had, under cover of the storm, set the whole party free; and we now behold them gathered in the Ranger's Cave, happy enough over their release. But the happiest of all was the ranger himself, who, with his restored wife in his arms, was repaid for his long, long days of suffering.

Only Solomon Strange was abroad that night. Furiously the wind drove in his face as he moved westward through the woods, guided by the lightning's glare. But what cared the mysterious Solomon Strange for the bellowing thunder, the rumbling wind, the sullen roar of the trees, the crashing of falling timber, the vivid lightning and the rain? Ah, what cared he?

On through the forest aisles he went. On, on.

Presently he entered a small opening in the woods and stopped.

That spot seemed to recall a dark deed to his mind, for it was there that he had beaten down the renegade, Blufe Brandon; and but a little ways off he could hear the waters rushing wildly through the black gorge into which he had thrown the body.

After a moment's pause he crossed the glade and entered the forest. A few steps more and he had disappeared in the cavern, wherein that day he had left his bearskin disguise.

Ten minutes passed and then he came forth again, but he wore not the disguise of the Black Bear.

His long yellow hair and whiskers floated around his head and face like ragged streamers in the wild winds.

At the mouth of the cavern he paused and leaned upon his knotted club.

Just then a vivid flash of lightning revealed the figure of a man with a thin, ghastly face and hollow eyes standing before him.

He stepped back and raised his club, for sure was he that an apparition confronted him.

Another flash of lightning. The figure still is there. Solomon Strange started like a guilty thing, as he recognized the man's features—the features of the renegade, Blufe Brandon.

"Brandon, is it you?" he asked.

"Yes; who are you?" returned the supposed defunct renegade.

"I am Solomon Strange, the Wizard of the West, the same who beat you down in the forest glade, and tumbled you into the gorge for dead. Hol! hol! a right merry time have I had playing Black Bear. Your bearskin fit me to a gnat's heel. Mr. Blufe, and then I went up to the robbers' ranch and passed myself off as Black Bear, and was initiated in the Brotherhood of Mountain Men, as you had arranged at the Devil's Tarn. Oh, a right jolly time had Duval Dunganvon and I, Mr. Blufe. A gay dog is Captain Duval, but he got drunk and I didn't, and the reason was, he poured goblets of liquor down his throat, while I poured just as much down—upon the floor. And while Duval, the thirsty dog, lay dead drunk, I stole a bottle of his best, gave it to his prisoners, and then let them out, locked the empty prison and hid the key, Mr. Blufe. And all this merry sport I've had in your bearskin, and no one knew but I was Black Bear himself. But how glad I am that you are not dead, Mr. Blufe, for I felt like I had done a dirty little deed when I flung you into the gorge, so deep, so dark, Mr. Blufe."

"I believe you are an infernal fool," returned the bruised and wounded renegade, growing enraged at what he knew must be so.

"Whew! how the winds blow," continued Strange. "Come into the cavern and I will tell you more, Mr. Blufe. Come in where the rain won't wash you into the gorge, for there is only a shadow of you left, you unfortunate dog."

"Go to the devil," responded the renegade; "I will not go in."

"But you must come, you must hear me, Mr. Blufe," and Strange seized him, and dragging him into the cavern, compelled him to listen to an hour's tales and talk.

When he had finished, however, he turned and glided out the cavern into the forest.

Soon after Blufe Brandon, weak with loss of blood and fasting, emerged from the cave and moved slowly away toward the Indian encampment, cursing the mysterious author of his sore bones and bruised head.

An hour after his interview with the resurrected chief, Solomon Strange was seated under the shelter of a great pine, in conversation with another man, one whom he had requested to meet him there—at the Devil's Tarn.

That man was the white-haired prisoner of the robbers' ranch, Gustave Barker.

For hours they sat and conversed as though no storm was raging around them.

Finally the storm died away, and as the moon struggled out through the rifts in the skurrying clouds, Solomon Strange and his companion left their seat beneath the great pine by the Devil's Tarn, and took their way eastward through the forest.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A DEMON NO MORE.

MORNING dawned bright and clear after the night of the storm.

Our friends in the ranger's cavern breakfasted early, for they were anxious to be off for the land of civilization.

Captain Warren Walraven concluded to give up his wild, secluded life, and with his angel wife go back to his old home in Iowa.

Though Ebony Jim and Flick O'Flynn were going to accompany them beyond the dangers of the hills, they had no desire to quit their nomadic life of hunters, and, in token of his respect for them, Rodger Rainbolt presented them his hidden home and all its appurtenances, Purl, the pet panther, and his library, though, unfortunately, neither of them could read a word.

Echo, the eagle, the ranger resolved to keep, so long as a feather of him was left.

As for Frank and Willis Armond, Ralph Rodman and Walter Lyman, they were fully satisfied with their few days of "recreation in the mountains," and concluded to go back to Omaha.

When all were ready to leave the cavern, Florence turned to her husband and said:

"Oh, Warren! how I would love to visit father's lonely grave before we return to the East."

"And I, too," said Silvia; "it would afford me great consolation to look upon poor father's grave before we go away."

"Your desire shall be granted, my dear children," said the ranger, with tears of tenderness in his eyes.

And so they left the cavern.

The ranger called up his faithful mustang, and having bridled and saddled it, mounted the women upon it.

Then, with the (seeming) indispensable and capacious saddle-bags, which he always carried, across his arm, the ranger took the lead and the party moved away.

Echo, the eagle, had been sent away in advance to keep his wary watch for danger before, while Ebony and Flick were sent out on either side to watch out for any enemies that might be disposed to attack them.

Their progress was slow and tedious, and it was not until the end of the third day that they reached the little glade wherein Wayland Sanford had been buried.

The young sportsmen found the grave as they had left it, though the bodies of the savages were gone.

That night the party encamped in the glade by the grave.

After supper had been prepared and eaten, and while the party sat around the camp-fire conversing, the subject of the Aerial Demon came up.

After each one had given his opinion and views on the subject, the ranger started to his feet, saying:

"Indeed, I have been neglecting our safety. I will go out into the forest and reconnoiter the immediate vicinity for lurking danger, then we must station guards for the night," and as he concluded he stooped and whispered something to Florence and Silvia, then turned, and calling his eagle, that had perched itself in a tree-top, walked away into the forest, though one but the women noticed that he took his capacious saddle-bags with him.

In about ten minutes he returned.

"Any signs of danger, capt'ing?" asked Ebony.

"None whatever," returned the captain; "but where can Echo be?" and, as he concluded, he placed the horn to his lips and blew a blast that echoed far away through the hills.

In a moment a scream was heard down the valley, and all eyes were instantly turned that way.

An exclamation of horror burst from the lips of the two hunters and the four young sportsmen.

They saw the Aerial Demon coming up the valley toward them!

The women uttered a little scream, while Rainbolt burst into a hearty laugh, then he placed the horn to his lips and blew another blast.

At this juncture the Aerial Demon was directly over the camp, and as the blast of the horn pealed out, the horrid creature ceased its flight and settled down, down into the very midst of the excited group!

A cry of surprise, followed by a ringing laugh, pealed from every lip.

The mystery of the Aerial Demon was explained, and the two hunters and four young sportsmen felt no little ashamed of their fears of such a harmless, but, after all, a rather mysterious contrivance of Rodger Rainbolt.

Let us analyze the Aerial Demon, the terror of the Indians:

First, it received its motive power from Echo, the eagle.

Second, its great arms, that beat and buffeted the air, were the eagle's wings, and the screams that it uttered were Echo's screams.

Third, the head of the demon was simply a dark-lantern, light and dextrously made, and carefully fastened upon Echo's back between the wings.

Fourth, the ghastly proportions, revealed by the flame, resembling a human frame, was the representation of a skeleton, made of light, dry pine, and suspended beneath the eagle by means of a small strap attached to it and passing over the back of the bird.

And this was the mystery of the Aerial Demon—a clever and ingenious contrivance, which, on more than one occasion, had saved the life of its originator! Only the patience of Rodger Rainbolt, in training Echo to perform those aerial missions, with almost a human understanding, could have produced such a result.

The capacious saddle-bags he always carried were the repository of the rude contrivance.

Ebony was at last forced to give up the idea that the Aerial Demon was the Old Nick, and begged hard for the eagle and the demon that he might use it to work on the fears of the Indians.

The ranger would not part with his noble bird, but gave the lantern and fixtures to the darky, who declared he would catch and train a hawk, or an owl, at the earliest time possible.

And so the night was spent as well as circumstances would admit, with our friends.

Morning dawned clear and warm.

The party breakfasted upon wild pigeon and venison procured by the two hunters, and prepared by Florence.

When they were ready to resume their journey, Florence drew her husband toward her father's grave, and said:

"Warren, promise me by this grave that you will forgive my father the wrongs he has done you."

"Let that," he said, kissing her pleading lips, "be the seal to the promise which I grant with all my heart."

"Ho, ho, ho! by the mysteries of the Aerial Demon! Here am I in the camp of a party of lords and ladies!"

All eyes were turned upon the speaker. It was the mysterious Solomon Strange, who had appeared from the forest at this juncture, and halted in their midst.

Florence and Silvia exchanged significant smiles.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Strange," said Captain Walraven.

"And I you, my lord; but you all seem as serious as though you were in a graveyard reading the inscriptions on the gravestones."

"Sir, those ladies' father lies buried there," said Frank, pointing to the grave.

"Ho, ho!" laughed Strange; "and how know you that, my boy?"

"Because I helped to bury him there," returned Frank.

"And what would you think, boy, if I, Solomon Strange, gifted with the power of the ancient sooth-sayers, should tell you that you are guilty of burying a live man there?"

"I would think you were a fool," retorted Frank.

"To err is human, to forgive divine; but I will prove it to you, my boy," said Strange; and as he concluded, began to unfasten the strips of bark and twisted grass from his limbs.

This done, his ragged garments dropped from his body, revealing it dressed in a fashionable suit of dark cloth. Then the man placed his hands to his head and face, and tore off the wig and mask of long yellow hair and whiskers, and—

Colonel Wayland Sanford stood before them in perfect health!

The young sportsmen, the two hunters, and Rodger Rainbolt were completely dumfounded, and started back as if from a ghost, unable to utter a word.

A merry peal of laughter rung from the sisters' lips. They knew their father lived, and were prepared for the meeting. He had made known his existence to Florence in the Indian encampment, hence their private interviews there. Florence then communicated the fact to Silvia.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the colonel; "do you believe now, my boy, that you buried a live man there?"

"Uncle Wayland Sanford!" exclaimed Frank, realizing the startling fact, "how in the name of Heaven did you escape?"

"Easy enough, since you had buried me in a state of catalepsy, brought on by excitement and fatigue, and not very deep in the ground, for when I regained consciousness I found I was in the ground, the dirt mostly off of me, and a pack of wolves lowering around. The beasts had dug the dirt away."

The young men came forward and congratulated the colonel on his resurrection and escape. Rainbolt took him by the hand, and said:

"I am happy to meet you thus, Wayland Sanford; your part has been well played. Solomon Strange was a strange man, and the mystery connected with him stands revealed."

"Warren Walraven," returned the colonel, "it eases my heart to hear you talk thus—I, who, so—"

"Never mind, colonel, never mind. I know what you would say. Let the past be forgotten," said the ranger.

"So be it, thank God!" murmured the colonel.

At this moment Gustave Barker emerged from the woods and joined the happy group.

Wayland Sanford's labor had been doubly rewarded.

When he had returned to consciousness and found that he had been buried for dead, that his young friends were gone, and recalled his situation, the last he knew before he fell unconscious from the shock the news Rainbolt had communicated to him had given him, he arose from his shallow grave, beat off the wolves that had, fortunately, dug him out; and then he resolved upon disguising himself and going forth to meet the ranger, and bring to justice the man who held him in his power.

He knew full well that Duval Dungarvon was the direct cause of Silvia's abduction, and he determined to find him and compel him to acknowledge his innocence in the Miner's Gulch affair to the world.

Before leaving the grave, however, he filled it up, smoothed it over and then covered it with the brush which he supposed his friends left over it. His object in this was to surprise them just as we have seen, should they ever return there.

Procuring his disguise, he set forth. What he accomplished the reader has already seen.

After some delay the party resumed its journey toward Cheyenne City, increased in number by the colonel and his old friend, Gustave Barker.

In the course of several days they arrived at the city.

There Ebony Jim and Flick O'Flynn bid them adieu and returned to the mountains, where they still remain; but as the Aerial Demon has never been heard of since Rodger Rainbolt left there, it is supposed that Ebony "couldn't make it work."

Silvia and her father were so overpowered with joy, that they gave up their visit to California, and returned with their friends to Omaha.

Captain Warren Walraven and his beautiful wife, Florence, reside at Council Bluffs, Iowa; and as it is but a little ways over to Omaha, they often go over to see Walter and Silvia Lyman, who had plighted their love in the ranger's cavern, away among the Black Hills, and who became man and wife shortly after their return home.

Willis, Frank and Ralph are still single, and often declare that Walter got the "best of the summer's recreation."

Colonel Sanford and his friend, Barker, reside in Omaha.

And so we leave them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

ONCE more, dear reader, let us go back to the Devil's Tarn.

It is night, but the moon is flooding the hill, wood and valley with its light.

Within its light, on the banks of a stream at the verge of the roaring falls, a man is standing, ever and anon glancing impatiently around him.

It is Duval Dungarvon, the robber-captain, and who is he there to meet?

The bushes part near him and a man stands before him.

It is Blufe Brandon, the renegade, and he is to meet Duval Dungarvon.

"Well, you've got along at last, have you?" asked Dungarvon, as the chief approached him. "I received your message and came at once to meet you, and here I've been waiting for an hour; but have you any news from the girl?"

"I am sorry, Duval, that I wasn't here at the appointed hour, but the fact is, I've been scarcely able to walk for several days; and the girl—well, I'll tell you soon."

"Why, Blufe, what ails you? your voice sounds like the grave. Several days? why you were well enough the night you became one of the brotherhood."

"Dungarvon, you're a fool."

"Why so? what do you mean, Blufe?"

"Just what I say. The other night that we met here, a man was concealed where he heard every word we said, and when we parted, he followed me, beat me down, stripped off my bearskin and put it on himself, threw me into a gorge, where I lay, more dead than alive, several days. The night of the storm I recovered sufficient to get out of the gorge just as a flood of water came sweeping down. I moved off toward my village, and on the way I met the man who had beat me down, robbed me of my disguise, and threw me into the gorge. He seized me, dragged me into a cavern, and told me he had been passing himself off as Black Bear, with success, and—"

"Hal hal hal!" roared Dungarvon; "well, you Indians must be a set of cursed fools, blind at that, to let a stranger fool them in that manner."

"Well, he did," continued Brandon, "and he went up to your ranch and was initiated into your band as Black Bear, and now who's the blind fools? hal hal hal! Duval Dungarvon and his men!"

"Brandon, you're lying as fast as you can talk."

"Not a bit of it, my gallant Duval; but hear me through. The man said you met him at Lone Pine, told him all about your ceremony, as he heard you promise to tell me; then he said you told him all about your killing the miner on the Yuba, swearing the deed onto Wayland Sanford; you throwing Barker into the shaft; the escape of Sanford; the affair about the girl, Florence; the death of one Captain Walraven; and the capture of Barker, the hero of the Yuba shaft, and two Omaha 'larks,' all of which were then in your prison at your ranch. Then he said you got drunk, and then he stole a bottle of your brandy and gave it to Barker and the Omaha 'larks,' let them out of prison, locked the cell, and hid the key."

"Blufe! is what you are telling true?"

"True as gospel, captain."

"And did the man tell you his name?"

"Yes. It was Wayland Sanford."

Duval Dungarvon growled with anger, cursed with rage, stamped with fury.

Blufe Brandon laughed in his face. This so enraged the robber-captain that he dealt the renegade a blow in the face that sent him heels over head into the brush.

Brandon sprung up, and drawing a knife, rushed upon his robber friend, wild with sudden rage.

The two grappled. Brandon was the larger, and could have easily handled the robber, but he was still quite weak from his affair with Solomon Strange, and their strength was about matched.

"Curse you!" hissed the renegade, "your life shall pay for that blow!"

To and fro the struggling men swayed. Their faces were livid with rage. Thick and fast fell the deadly blows. The ground at their feet grew slippery with their own blood. At last they fell, striking and tugging like maddened beasts. They arose again to their feet, staggered backward and—

Toppling, fell over the cliff and were crushed to atoms, almost, against the jagged rocks as they dropped in the stream at the foot of the Devil's Tarn.

Two figures came from the shadow of the woods, and walking to the edge of the cliff, looked down into the foam-lashed waters below.

"Golly, de jig's up wid dem villains."

"Av, and their blood is not on our heads, so it ain't."

And Flick O'Flynn and Ebony Jim descended the cliff, entered their canoe, and in a moment were lost in the mist and spray at the foot of the Devil's Tarn, as they sought their cavern retreat.

THE END.

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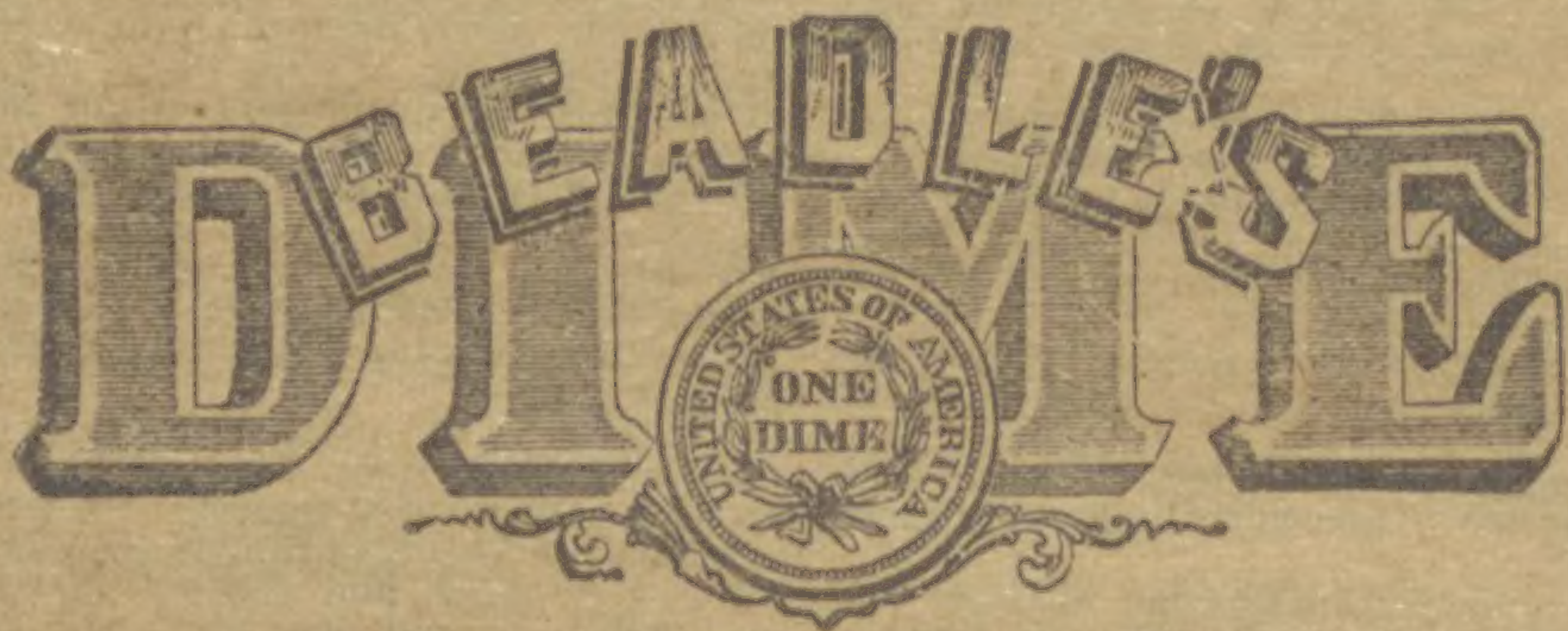


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